

Kaleidoscope Heart

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Kaleidoscope Heart

by [LiNafied](#)

Summary

She looked like living desire, the craving, the want, boiling inside of Irene everytime she looked up to gathered another detail to draw, Wendy transitioning from easygoing to sultry in the time Irene had taken to draw her out, the look in her eyes taunting, as though she was saying that she was something out of reach, like the stars she portrayed.

Notes

University AU Set in September's universe, where smoking and drinking is acceptable within the underaged community.

The Painter

The hallway was filled with people as it always was on a Monday. People walking around with their heads bowed and their eyes half shut while slogging down coffee as though it was a lifeline, feet stomping against the stone floors as the sun filtered through the ancient archways that were teeming with history and knowledge. She hunched her shoulders and pushed past the people who paid her no attention, some even checking her on the shoulder as she went through the crowd.

Irene clutched her sketchbooks to her chest tightly and tried to make herself as small as possible, her art lecturer's words replaying at the back of her mind like a tape.

She groaned to herself and made her way to an empty space at the archways, ignoring the looks the other girls were giving her when she sat down, her brown hair falling into her eyes when she bent over to tie her shoelaces, purple Keds standing out in the midst of the heels and flats. The frayed bottoms of her jeans brushed past her ankles when she crossed them, her sketchbook laying on her lap as she twisted her hair into a messy bun, her eyes scanning the crowd.

Irene thumbed the edges of her sketchbook and heaved out a loud sigh, dreamy and weary at the same time as she managed to find the shade of blonde that has been filling her dreams, haunting her consciousness and bleeding into her paintings.

You have one more piece! Find something that wows me, Irene!

She did have something that would wow her mentor. Something bold and exciting that would throw everyone else's game off because no one has ever successfully pulled one off before.

Something bold and exciting! Something different! Out of your comfort zone!

But the only problem was that she had no subject.

Scratch that.

She didn't have anyone else other than one person in mind that she wanted as a subject.

Her eyes were still trained on golden hair, her mouth curling into a smile when the owner of the brightly coloured hair laughed, head thrown back and eyes squeezing shut. She tilted her head to one side, envying the friend sitting next to the blonde for being able to witness such a beautiful smile up close.

Irene imagined it would be like witnessing a sunrise meant for one person.

She sighed and lowered her gaze, not wanting to linger on for too long, lest the girl noticed. She flipped through her pages of her rapidly filling sketchbook, each page depicting a smile similar to the one she had just seen, drawn in a different place, context, even hair colour. Irene stopped at a blank page and dug her bag for her pencil case, the red and yellow larvae character looking at her mockingly as she took out a sketch pencil. Her hands moved on their own and soon the page was filled with a rough sketch.

The page was soon decorated (again) with the smile of Wendy Son.

*

(All it took was a smile.

One smile and Irene had fallen.)

It was a morning like every other. Irene had gone to her part time job like she always did, bright and early because she wanted to get in some reading before her shift officially started, her large tome of art history weighing down her book bag as the bag strap cut into her shoulder. The head librarian gave her a cordial smile when she entered before speaking up shakily, Irene rushing over to the counter to stop the lady from standing up. She gave the brunette a smile and sat down gratefully, the other library helper shooting Irene a dirty glare.

(It wasn't a secret that out of all the helpers, the head favoured Irene, often sneaking the girl a drink or a snack just before her shift.

Even though it was not allowed in the library.)

"Irene, dear, is it alright if you start your shift earlier today? I have to settle some family issues so I need someone to man the main table."

Irene placed her bag on the counter and she nodded, smiling easily as she patted the old lady's arm.

"No worries. You go on ahead, Miss."

The woman smiled and laid a hand on Irene's, her voice croaky as the sides of her eyes crinkled into a smile.

"You're such a good child."

They exchanged some more small talk before the head librarian made her way slowly, not before directing the other helper towards the shelves to put the books back. Another dirty look was aimed towards Irene before she was left alone at the main counter, Irene pulling her book out of her bag and placing it in front of her, preparing for an easy shift today.

(The duties of the main table were simple; mainly checking out the books students wanted to borrow and logging books when it was brought back.

But these days, with the improvement of technologies, hardly anyone checked books out anymore, preferring to take pictures of the pages they needed instead of lugging the entire book out.)

For the most part, Irene was undisturbed, looking up from her notes every once in awhile to greet the students entering, but she managed to make a good headway through her book, her head bobbing to an unheard beat as she scribbled yet another fact that she would need later on in the quiz. Flipping to another page, she snuck a glance at the table clock, mentally calculating just how many more chapters she could review before her classes started when a voice cut through her mind babble.

“Excuse me?”

She lifted her head at the sound, her brows furrowing together in confusion (because no one spoke to the librarians unless they were desperate) and was promptly blown away by the sight.

Irene blinked rapidly, the lead in her mechanical pencil snapping loudly as she pressed down on it a little too hard. Dazed, she fumbled with her papers and stood up quickly, her cheeks staining red when the blonde raised an eyebrow at her flustered state but thankfully saying nothing of it.

“A-ah, yes! How can I help you?”

The blonde smiled, Irene inhaling sharply and held her breath, hoping that her heart wouldn't explode because in front of her had to be a work of art come to life.

(Her mind raced to all the powerpoint presentations her mentor had shown in class and Irene was sure none of the masterpieces matched up to the girl in front of her.)

“I was wondering if you had these books on hand? I would like to check them out.”

The blonde handed over a list, waving the piece of paper slightly when Irene made no move to take it. Jumping slightly, Irene took the note from the clearly amused blonde and took a seat, swiping at the mouse to wake the computer sitting idly at the table. While she was tapping away at the keyboard to look for the books the girl wanted, the blonde struck up a conversation, her smile loud in her words and her fingers drumming the table top served as the beat behind the music that was her voice.

“So I’ve never seen you around here before. New volunteer?”

Irene cleared her throat, cursing at herself when her voice came out a pitch higher.

“N-no. I’m part timing here. I’m usually at the back shelving.”

The blonde chuckled.

“That makes more sense. I was about to conclude the old lady found the fountain of youth or something.”

Irene laughed along nervously and pressed the printer icon by the left side of the screen, the printer jolting to life as it spat out a piece of paper containing the sections the books were in. She pulled the sheet out of the tray and handed it over to the blonde, the breath she was holding exhaled out in a sigh as the brunette stood up, Irene managing a small smile.

“Here. These are the sections where the books are at. I’ll check them out for you after you’ve found them.”

The girl smiled at her brightly and turned away from the counter, barely walking three steps away from Irene before she turned back around, a sheepish look on her face.

“Could...could you maybe show me? I’m not too familiar with the system.”

Biting her lip, Irene glanced around to the near empty library, her sense of responsibility (She technically wasn’t supposed to leave the table) warring against her want to help the girl. Her choice was made for her when the girl’s smile shifted slightly, the left corner of her lips curling up higher than her right and it had Irene exiting from the counter, her fingers pulling the paper away from the blonde.

“Follow me please.”

Hoping that the other girl was not as aware as she was of the blush tainting her cheeks, Irene walked to the specific bookshelves quickly, pulling out worn books in a practiced manner and depositing them into the blonde’s arms. She ignored the amused grin the girl was shooting at her, the blonde tilting her head to one side as Irene hastened her steps, the brunette eager to finish this chore as quickly as possible.

(It was bad for her rapidly beating heart to remain in this person’s presence for too long.)

“I think that’s all the books? We can check them out now if you want?”

The blonde nodded, only speaking up once the books were deposited at the counter, a cheeky smile plastered on her face as she leant forward, elbows on the tabletop and chin resting on her hands.

“Do you not like me? You seem to be in an awful hurry to get rid of me.”

Her elbow knocked against the edge of the table, Irene once again flustered by the smile and question, the blonde’s smirk dropping immediately as she tried to clamber over the counter to check on Irene’s arm.

“Oh my god! Are you okay?”

Irene waved a hand.

“Y-ye-Yes! I’m okay!”

She lowered her gaze and concentrated on scanning the books, aware that the girl was looking at her worriedly but she ignored it, still avoiding the look the blonde was giving her as she stammered out her question.

“C-could I have some ID, please?”

Fingers brushed past hers, Irene barely managing to stop herself from flinching and she nodded in thanks, her heart echoing in her ears as she scanned the ID.

(Wendy Son. First Year. Music Therapy Major.

Smart *and* pretty.)

Gathering the books, she placed the ID on the top and handed them over.

“Here. Thank you. Please come again.”

The blonde, Wendy, coughed slightly, Irene greeted with a blinding smile that was unlike whatever Wendy had gave her before and the blonde tilted her head, shrugging her shoulders in place of a wave.

“Thanks, skitty. I’ll see you around.”

Completely unaware at how her smile had dismantled Irene’s psyche, Wendy walked out of the library with careful steps, her small frame hunched over a bunch of books, hair falling over her eyes attractively.

Irene spent the rest of her shift staring into space, her notes for her quiz forgotten.

*

Her phone beeped twice, her five minute reminder to stop staring at Wendy and get to her next class jolting her out of the memory. Her pencil scratched across the page, ruining the sun on her page and she scowled at the device tucked in the back pocket of her messenger bag. Sighing, she tore the page out and shredded it, shutting the sketchbook and packed her stuff, aware that she now probably has about three minutes to get to the other side of the campus.

Tucking her books in her arms, she heaved her bag over her shoulder and pushed her way through the filled hallway, apologising to the many people she bumped into in her haste to get out of the courtyard and into the stairwell area. Her university mates did not seem to have heard it as they continued to check shoulders with her, Irene feeling like she wasn't going anywhere. Frustrated, she pushed through a group of giggly girls and ignored the glares aimed at her when they broke apart, Irene stumbling an empty space.

And was promptly sent flying when she smacked into a body, her sketchbooks scattering in front of her, her words coming out loosely.

“Oh, *fuck* on a candlestick!”

Shaking her jarred brain back into place, Irene looked up to see who she bumped into, her apology dying in place when Wendy smiled at her, the blonde dusting her jeans off as she picked herself off the floor. Opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish, Irene could barely respond when Wendy chuckled at her, her hands reaching out for Irene's scattered coursework.

“I didn't peg you for the swearing type, skitty.”

Irene snapped into action and grabbed the sketchbook nearest to her (which was thankfully the one filled with her almost stalkerish drawings), her words tumbling out from her mouth as she scrabbled for the rest, Wendy already holding two in her arms.

“I'm so sorry! I didn't see you - It's not intentional-”

Wendy laughed, her fingers wrapping around Irene's arm and the brunette found herself staring straight into the blonde's eyes, Wendy grinning that one sided grin brightly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Irene sputtered, her brain frying out with seeing Wendy up close and she just nodded, blankly registering that the rest of her books were still with Wendy.

(Wendy was impossibly beautiful, even more so up close, from the slope of her jaw to the bow of her lips.

The shape of her eyes that curved up into the most beautiful smile and the line of her cheekbones that made a breathtaking face.)

“-kitty?”

Irene blinked, the sounds filtering back in as Wendy took a step back, her fingers thumbing through her sketchbooks. Her brain went from dead to overdrive, flinching as she realised Wendy was looking through her works, her fingers tightening around the books in her own arms and wondering just how weird it would be if she just ripped the sketches away from Wendy.

She was just about to commit a grab and run when Wendy whistled, the blonde’s eyebrows raising as she shot Irene an impressed look, the other girl lingering on a drawing of a woman sitting on a bench, hair flowing with the unseen wind. Irene blushed and looked away, a smile making its way onto her lips when Wendy complimented the drawing.

“Wow. I knew you were an art major -These are really good, skitty!”

Irene shuffled on her feet slightly.

“Really?”

Wendy nodded enthusiastically, passing the books back over to Irene.

“Yeah! I reckon you could do a gallery showing anytime soon!”

Irene knew that it wasn't quite true. There are others in her class who were better, who lived, ate and breathed art, who went around with a critical eye and found colours, shades, lines, beauty, history in everything they laid eyes on. They were the ones who yearned for the exhibitions and the galleries, to make a name like Van Gogh and the likes. Irene also knew while she was good, she lacked the proper “muse” for a lack of a better term (her muse was a person while theirs were the world itself) and for that, her mentor was often exasperated with her.

But Wendy's praise, her *muse's* praise, was a welcomed shock and Irene, though it was not her, preened in it. Her cheeks heated further and her eyes sparkled as she regarded Wendy from beneath her bangs, muttering shyly as she fiddled pointlessly with the rings of her sketchbooks.

“Thanks.”

Wendy laughed again, a melodious sound that made Irene want to draw it out in physical form and the blonde reached out to ruffle her hair.

“Just stating the truth, skitty.”

Irene nodded, her pinched fingers leaving her books for a moment to fix her hair. Wendy leant back on her heels and tilted her head, her smile still settling easily on her lips.

“Alright, skitty. I have to get going, I'm pretty sure we're *both* late for our classes.”

It took a flip of blonde hair and the image of Wendy's back to realise that *this* was Irene's opportunity, for her to open her mouth and ask for Wendy's permission to be her subject. Her

hand shot out, in a show of courage Irene never thought she would have, clasping around a warmth Irene could get used to and tugging.

(It was now or never.)

Wendy turned around, visibly confused.

“Skitty?”

Her voice came out in a squeak, her ability to speak diminished now that she was faced with the very real possibility of Wendy laughing in her face before running away in fright. Or disgust. Or both.

“Skitty, what is it?”

Clearing her throat, Irene lowered her chin slightly and asked in a demure manner, aware of Wendy’s gaze on her.

“Could I - I mean - Would you let me draw you?”

Irene closed her eyes, fully expecting Wendy to pull her arm away and scoff at her.

She was pleasantly surprised once again when Wendy merely questioned her curiously.

“Draw me?”

Irene nodded and continued to explain.

“Like... a life drawing? It’s for a piece in my final assignment and - Well -”

She trailed off, Wendy asking the one question she didn’t want her to ask.

“Why me?”

As a skittish creature, as proven by Wendy’s nickname for her (she was sure the other girl knew her name), Irene contemplated running away and hoped to never see Wendy again in this vast university of theirs.

But she had already gotten this far, Wendy responding in a manner that was completely opposite of her imagined scenarios (most prominent being Wendy looking at her as though she was crazy before storming off) and the frightened soul that was Irene had gone away, leaving only this stupid (brave) shell of a human.

“Because... you look like living art already?”

She didn’t mean for the lilt at the end of her sentence but it seemed to work because Wendy went from curious to contemplative, the blonde tilting her head to one side.

“When you say life drawing, you don’t mean like *naked* , do you?”

Irene’s face felt like it was on fire, her neck snapping dangerously as she shook her head.

“No, no, no - It’s not-”

Something bold and exciting! Something different! Out of your comfort zone!

She paused, her voice meek and *there it was* , the incredulous look from her scenarios.

“Maybe ... minimal clothing?”

There was a pause, long enough for Irene to know it was a bad idea, asking in the first place and she quickly retracted her words, her apologies falling like a waterfall from her lips.

“I’m sorry - You don’t- Just forget that I asked.”

She lifted her eyes just enough to see Wendy’s smile, small and pitying and the blonde nodded.

“Yeah. I don’t think it’s a good idea - I mean - I’ll have to decline, skitty.”

Irene nodded, masking the shame she felt from her voice.

“It’s okay. I’ll think of something else-”

Her words were cut off when a jock who was hovering near them shouted at her, eyes crazed and hands waving in the air, Irene taken aback because she’d never have expected anyone to eavesdrop on them.

“I volunteer! I’ll be your subject, your canvas, anything you want, Irene!”

Irene’s eyes widened to the point where they felt like it was about to pop out, the girl still waving her arms madly even as her shorter friend tried to drag her away, the black haired girl looking extremely embarrassed for her friend.

“Irene! I volunteer!!”

The shouts trailed down the hallway, Wendy laughing once they were out of range, the blonde waving a hand towards them.

“Well, it looks like you’d have a ready subject there?”

Irene smiled weakly, her shoulders hunched as she spoke in an undertone, Wendy’s mouth pulling back into a surprised ‘O’.

“Yeah, but they don’t inspire me like you do.”

Her teeth clicked together as soon as the words left her mouth and she screwed her eyes close, walking off so she can dig a hole and hide from the world for the next thirty years.

(Stupid, stupid, *stupid* , could she think before she spoke? She swore the world was against her.)

“Irene?”

Wendy was beside her now, her athletic build letting her catch up with Irene easily.

“Irene, what did you mean by that?”

It would seem that her tongue had decided to rebel against her because words were tumbling from her mouth before she could even get a grasp on what she was saying.

“It’s just - you’re kind of my muse - I just - I just thought drawing you would be the best for my final piece.”

It crossed a line, Irene knew, when Wendy stopped walking, Irene pausing in her steps to stand in front of her, back facing the blonde. The silence amidst the bustling students was loud and Irene heaved in a deep breath, very ready to go find a closet and lock herself inside for the rest of her natural born life.

(Honestly, is there anyone as socially awkward as she was?

She cursed at her mother for making her this way.)

“Would it screw up your final mark?”

Wendy’s hand was soft on her shoulder, her voice matching her gentle touch.

Irene shook her head, relieved that at least one part of her body was listening to her.

“Are you sure?”

Nodding towards the bricked ground, Irene answered quickly, wanting to be away from this situation as quickly as possible.

“Yeah. I’ll find something else like you said.”

Something bold and exciting! Something different! Out of your comfort zone!

(Her mentor can eat her drawings if she wasn’t pleased with them.

She was already about ten thousand miles out of her comfort zone right now and she felt like she wants to melt and join the bricks on the ground.)

Wendy's hand left her shoulder and she took it as a signal to walk off, getting about three steps in when the blonde's voice rang out, Irene turning back instinctively to find that Wendy had again followed her.

"Irene, wait."

Irene waited, watched as the blonde debated with herself before sighing out a continuing sentence, an unsure smile on her lips.

"I'll do it."

Irene floundered for a moment.

"I'm sorry - What?"

The other girl's eyes turned soft and the smile went from unsure to light and soft, the blonde nodding.

"I'll do it. The sketch thing."

Irene tried to resist the urge to hug Wendy.

And promptly failed when her arms disobeyed the signals her brain was sending, her fingers locking around Wendy's back tightly as she hopped on the spot.

(Again, a warmth she could get used to.)

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Wendy returned the hug goodnaturedly, her chuckles tickling Irene’s ear.

“Just make sure you make me beautiful.”

Irene nodded into Wendy’s shoulder and detached herself, her cheeks aching from the wide smile she was sporting.

“It would be easy. Considering my subject!”

Wendy laughed and shook her head, her fingers brushing her bangs away from eyes that held the stars.

“At this rate, I might have to be slightly intoxicated to get through it. Considering I’d be near naked.”

Irene blushed but her smile was still on her face, her happiness stalling the reality that has yet to set in.

(Later, much later, she’d be stricken by the fact she’d be looking at Wendy in a near naked state.)

Wendy shrugged and walked away backwards, her smile turning playful.

“Make sure to get some wine! I don’t strip for free, alright?”

Breathlessly, Irene nodded, waving a hand at Wendy who had giggled before rushing off, her blonde hair like a halo amongst the black and brown.

As soon as Wendy was out of sight, Irene turned away and ran towards the stairs, her books held tight against her chest as she tried to breathe.

And then reality set in.

Oh god .

Something bold and exciting! Something different! Out of your comfort zone!

Well, Irene did step out of her comfort zone. And got something bold and exciting.

She can only hope that it would be worth it at the end.

(And that her crush that was the size of Jupiter could be kept hidden.)

The Good Girl

Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday in advance, Wendy Son SeungWan

“Want a smoke?”

Wendy was a good girl.

A straight A student who also loved the course she had chosen, the girl who has a smile ready for everyone and a set of values she adhered closely to.

Which was why she was stuck behind the library indulging in her vices (her peers would balk at the sight of even a drink in her hands), taking the spliff from the upperclassman, Tiffany’s dark eyes roaming around the empty lot disinterestedly, smoke billowing from her mouth and wisping away in the atmosphere. She placed the stick on her lips, the paper rough against her lips and inhaled deeply, the sharp, tangy smoke stinging the back of her throat and up her nose. Her eyes watered but she welcomed the feeling, exhaling the excess smoke from her nostrils, tilting her head upwards and watching the grey smoke disperse.

“Rough day?”

Tiffany’s voice, whether rough from disuse or her barely noticeable hangover, was always husky, sending shivers (of what?) down Wendy’s spine. The blonde shook her head, golden strands catching the sunlight filtering through the awning, Tiffany taking another shot at her spliff.

“Just...contemplating my recent choices and wondering if it’s going to go to shit at the end.”

A small smile quirk at the corner of Tiffany's lips, her eyes lighting to life mischievously.

"Doesn't everything eventually turn to shit in the end?"

Wendy made a face.

"Eh. Some things do remain shiny, don't they?"

Tiffany chuckled lowly but didn't say anything, merely letting the spliff burn between her fingers.

Not for the first time, Wendy found herself wondering what happened to the girl behind the blank demeanour and the rare smiles, often found in the small flashes of personality behind eyes deeper than the ocean. The blonde dug her heels into the ground and leant against the wall next to Tiffany, watching at the small glow of the burning stick, making theories in her head on how much shit Tiffany had to go through to have to hide so much of herself.

"So...what is this choice that had you so troubled?"

If it wasn't for Tiffany staring at her, Wendy would've dismissed the words as a hallucination because Tiffany has never taken an interest beyond her photography and her parties (and one other thing). Blinking rapidly, Wendy struggled to find her words, displaying her teeth in a smile that she knew Tiffany could see through immediately.

"I offered my ... help to a ... friend."

(Was Irene a friend?

Beyond the nickname and the occasional greetings when she went to the library, she barely knew the art major, the brunette as mysterious and beautiful as the chords that made Wendy's daily life, as far away as the first time Wendy saw her.)

Tiffany raised an eyebrow, a single motion that telegraphed more of her emotions than her face did.

“And this is troubling you?”

Wendy reached over and plucked the almost burned down spliff from Tiffany’s fingers, taking a hit before answering.

“It’s the nature of the favour that has me troubled.”

Wendy didn’t know why she agreed to it after saying no in the first place. If it was any of her friends, she would’ve given them a look before dismissing it but with Irene and her pleading eyes and soft words, Wendy had found herself crumbling and reaching out, wanting more than anything to put the smile back onto the clearly shamefaced girl.

(Why?)

It was as though the world kept drawing them together, two opposite poles of a magnet that kept sticking together no matter how hard Wendy tried resisting.

(Why was she resisting?)

Why would she resist a girl who was so shy that even the notion of Wendy playfully flirting with her had her red faced and eyes averted?

A girl that kept popping up in Wendy’s mind ever since that first meeting?)

Tiffany took the burnt out spliff from her and tossed it onto the ground, her boots stomping on the glowing end to put the light out. The dark haired girl pushed her bangs away from her

face and once again, Wendy was taken aback from how *pretty* Tiffany was behind the smudged makeup and the hair covering half her face.

“The favour can’t be troubling you that much if you said yes.”

Wendy hummed, her nails scratching at the tear in her jeans.

“If that’s not the case, then why am I so out of it?”

Tiffany snorted, her eyebrow raising again.

“How would I know? Your thoughts are your own.”

(Part of her knew why; it was really obvious, but the other part of her, the larger part, the part of her that didn’t want anybody to know of her vices and the constant need to please her overbearing parents doesn’t want to think about it, not yet, not now, not ever.)

As though reading her mind, Tiffany continued on slowly, her fingers pulling at a frayed thread at the end of her black jumper.

“Maybe it’s not the nature of the favour but who’s asking it.”

Wendy gaped at her, about to rebut the black haired girl’s words when another voice cut in.

“Who’s asking who for a favour?”

The both of them turned towards the newcomer, Wendy’s eyes trailing back towards Tiffany to witness the transformation.

(The other thing Tiffany cared about.)

True to form, a smile was already making its way towards Tiffany's face, the muted stars in her eyes alight at the sight of her girlfriend, Jessica pushing away some stray branches as she walked towards them. The older blonde grinned in response and gave Tiffany a slight kiss, just by the corner of the black haired girl's smile, their fingers intertwining. She glanced over to Wendy, taking in Wendy's expression and her smile dimmed a fraction.

"Ah, Wendy. I didn't see you there."

(The silent apology for the public display of affection was loud behind the innocent words.

Wendy noticed Tiffany's hand tightening around Jessica's.)

The blonde waved a hand, Wendy shaking her head.

"It's fine."

Jessica's expression told her that she clearly didn't believe her but the older girl didn't pursue it, turning her attention back towards Tiffany, her eyes softening at the sight of Tiffany.

"You ready to go?"

Tiffany nodded, tilting her head towards Wendy, her form of a silent goodbye before following Jessica out, the both of them pressed together tightly, fingers interlaced. Wendy watched them quietly, waving her fingers in return before turning her face towards the skies, the pang in her chest that always accompanied the presence of both Jessica and Tiffany thrumming and bleeding into her veins. Her upbringing whispered words at the back of her mind, reminding her of all the ways it was wrong, the social conventions of today's world

warring against it and saying that love was love, no matter what it was. It gave her a headache, Wendy pinching the bridge of her nose to relieve some of the pressure.

It was tiring, holding both personas up, one for her overbearing, traditional parents, parents she cannot disappoint and her liberal friends, friends who thought the Jessica/Tiffany saga that took place last year was the best thing to have ever happened. But she did it because she loves her parents and she loves her friends and she didn't want to lose anybody.

Which was probably why her decision to model for Irene was troubling her-

(Irene, sweet, shy Irene who smiled like a nebula forming and has a voice that sounded like an angel.

Irene who made Wendy want to put a label on what she felt, want to name the swelling warmth in her chest even though she didn't know what she'd call it if she ever wanted to.)

No, not troubling.

It was terrifying her.

But there was no way to take the decision back.

Not without taking away the small burst of happiness that Irene had given her when the brunette hugged her in gratitude, comforting (like a home) arms wrapped around Wendy like a blanket.

It was small and probably meaningless to Irene, but somehow, to Wendy, everything about Irene meant something, no matter how small.

*

(She had seen Irene long before their first meeting in the library.

Soft, beautiful and quiet, stirring up an unknown feeling within her with just a quirk of her lips.)

“God damn it, Seulgi.”

Wendy cursed her friend under her breath, the bag slipping in her sweaty hands. Her shoes skidded against the pavement, the ground wet from the sudden rainfall that kept her at the store for a precious twenty minutes. She jostled the party supplies in her arms before running past the next corner, sighing in relief when she saw the park coming up ahead of her. Seulgi waved her hands frantically over her head and ran out to greet her, practically ripping the bag away from Wendy.

“She’s almost here!”

Wendy scowled at her, bending over to catch her breath.

“Whose fault is that?!”

Seulgi waved her off, pulling the streamers from the bag and hanging it onto the trees, decorating the small barbeque pit area in preparation for Joy’s birthday. Wendy heaved in deep breath, waiting for her heart to stop feeling like it would come out from her chest before moving to help Seulgi, her friend frantically tossing the colourful pieces of paper over the pillars and sticking tape on them. Appalled, Wendy followed her from behind to fix the so called “artistic mess” look Seulgi was going for.

In about ten minutes, the area looked presentable enough for a surprise party, Seulgi slumping against the picnic table and groaning.

“Never, ever, again. The stress is killing me.”

Leaning heavily against Seulgi, Wendy smacked her friend in the back, ignoring the pained welp and muttered darkly.

“You’re stressed? I was the one who had to run three blocks to and fro to get decorations that *you* forgot!”

Seulgi pushed against her roughly.

“I’m like a coral. I will die from stress.”

Lifting her body away from the older girl, she looked at Seulgi incredulously, wanting to reach out to feel if Seulgi was running a fever.

It was the only plausible explanation for the weird sayings Seulgi was currently spouting.

Her fingers brushed past Seulgi’s forehead before she smacked the other girl in shock, their phones ringing in unison and startling them. Ignoring the red welt on Seulgi’s skin, the both of them scrambled for their phones, eyes widening at the message that was on both their screens.

ETA five minutes!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Seulgi vaulted across the picnic table to hide behind the barbecue pit while Wendy ducked underneath the table, her small stature easily hidden behind the bench. They held their breaths and listened for the incoming footsteps, rewarded when they heard Yeri’s voice not long after, the youngest amongst them chattering at the top of her voice nervously, Joy’s deadpan tone interjecting at certain periods.

“Honestly, Joy, it’s going to be worth it! I mean, barbecue!”

“That we can get at a restaurant, what are you-”

“SURPRISE!!”

Wendy and Seulgi popped up at just the right moment, Joy slipping backwards and landing on her behind in shock as she glanced up at her friends. Seulgi grinned triumphantly and waved her arms around, her eyes disappearing from the force of her smile.

“Joy! Surprise! Happy birthday!”

Wendy watched the myriad of emotions flitting on Joy’s face, from anger to annoyance before a burst of happiness, the normally ill tempered girl smiling in response of Seulgi’s overwhelming excitement and she sighed in response, looking up at Yeri with a wry grin.

“I’m guessing you’re the lookout.”

Yeri laughed and pulled the girl up, nodding as Wendy was grabbed into the group hug as well.

Joy shook her head, a fond smile on her lips.

“Thanks, guys.”

They stayed in the hug until it was broken by Joy.

“Now where’s my barbecue?”

They giggled and proceeded with the birthday celebration, each of them handling their own tasks to make sure Joy had the most memorable time.

Wendy was at the pit (as she was the only one among them that could cook), cutting the meat and making sure they were grilled to perfection, brown on the outside, pink on the inside, just the way Joy liked it when a flash of purple caught her eyes. Curious, she turned her head towards the bright colour, eyes blinking rapidly when she caught sight of a very *beautiful* girl holding what seems to be a sketchbook, pale skin almost glowing under the sun's rays.

She flipped the sizzling beef absentmindedly, eyes trailing after the girl who was walking around in circles, sometimes stopping to look at the flowers and the scenery around her. Her head tilted towards a huge tree shading several couples and fingers framing a guy who was jogging down the path before she turned towards a girl reading on the bench, the girl seemingly decided on that before she just plopped down on the grass, book opened and a pencil case materialising in her hands.

(An artist?)

She continued to observe the girl while cooking, tuning out the chatter of her friends, her attention zeroing in on the sound of the wind and the image of the brunette drawing without rest. Unknowingly, Wendy started to catalogue everything about the girl, the small twitches of her fingers when she made an arc on her book, the delicate her fingers would tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. She was completely enraptured by the way the brunette blinked when she turned her head towards the subject on the bench.

So intent in her observation of the stranger, Wendy failed to notice that the beef she was attending to was burning.

Wendy jolted into action when Yeri yelled out, the younger girl sounding extremely distressed.

“Ah! The beef!”

Wendy cursed loudly and tried peeling the blackened meat off the grill, Joy and Seulgi also joining in the commotion when they realised the rest of their precious beef have joined the realm of the inedible (much like the sandwiches Seulgi had brought).

It was only after Wendy had apologised sufficiently to the pouting trio that she managed to turn back towards the girl, sighing (in relief?) when she saw that the brunette was still there even though it seemed like she was done, the stranger standing up and brushing off the grass stains on her jeans. Wendy watched (like a creep) at how she was eyeing her own work before nodding once, the cover of the book shut tightly and her pencil case dropped back into the messenger bag Wendy failed to notice before.

And then her breath caught in her throat when the girl turned towards the barbecue pit, completely unaware of the audience she had, a small smile on her face as she turned towards the sun, face alight and framed in the beauty of nature that failed to compare.

(Wendy's heart started beating quickly, following the steps of the girl who was moving out of the park.)

And then the confusion settled in, Wendy frowning when her chest started to pang, her mind in a mess at the disappearance of the girl.

*

Wendy didn't see Irene for two days after that, just catching glimpses of a harried brunette rushing up and down hallways with canvas rolls bigger than the girl, her hair falling out of a messy bun (attractively). It irked Wendy because she would like to sit down and talk to the art major, want to work out the kinks of the agreement.

Like where were they going to meet? Would it be in underwear or a swimsuit? (How drunk does Wendy have to get so she won't be conscious for the sitting?) or even when would they be doing the thing.

And also maybe try and find out what it was about herself that had Irene pegging her as a muse, the brunette's words ringing in her head like a broken disc, marred with Tiffany's silent

question.

Maybe it's not the nature of the favour but who's asking it.

They don't inspire me like you do.

Groaning, Wendy pushed the doors to the cafeteria open, looking around aimlessly for her friends on the off chance Seulgi, Joy or Yeri would be in the canteen at this time. However, it would seem that she was unlucky today as she did not see any of them, Joy especially impossible to miss after dying her hair fire engine red. Grousing, she made her way to the lunch line, randomly picking out one of the lunch menu items listed before paying what she owed.

(All chicken... Really? Where was the variety?)

Holding her tray, Wendy wandered around for an empty place, passing by several occupied tables before stopping at one, the familiar chocolate brown calling out to her.

A smile made its way to her lips before she could stop it, her body moving against her will as she sat opposite Irene, the art major having yet to notice her presence.

She cleared her throat, watching in amusement as the girl she nicknamed skitty jumped in her seat, her fingers fumbling to close her sketchbook, where Wendy caught a glimpse of several animals, though it was (weirdly) mostly hamsters for some odd reason. The brunette's eyes widened at the sight of Wendy and Wendy almost felt bad for the poor girl when Irene knocked her elbow against the table, stammering as she greeted Wendy.

“A-ah! Wendy! I didn't see you there.”

Wendy leant her chin onto an open palm and tilted her head at her, the whispers that had been plaguing her since the agreement slowing down to a halt, an easy smile on her lips.

“I can tell, skitty. What were you drawing that had you so riveted?”

As always, when Wendy called Irene’s talent into the open, the brunette blushed again, her fingers twitching against the black cover of the sketchbook.

“No-nothing much. Just some wildlife. We had a module about it earlier a-and my mentor said that I should keep at it since I’m getting the proportions wrong.”

Wendy raised a brow, her tone lowering subconsciously as she pointed towards the book.

“Huh. But from what I saw, you seemed to be doing a pretty good job.”

Irene laughed softly, shyly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and lowered her eyes.

“Thanks. But my mentor - She’s - I understand where she’s coming from. So I have to keep practicing.”

Wendy thought back to her own mentor and the strict way she kept Wendy at her compositions and her instrumentals and understood where Irene was coming from, humming slightly as she proceeded to unwrap her lunch (a sandwich? Chicken? What was she thinking?).

She was about to take a bite of her sandwich when she realised that Irene had no food in front of her, the other girl steadfastly looking elsewhere with her cheeks still stained pink.

“Irene.”

(The brunette’s head whipped back towards her so quickly it had Wendy wondering about whiplash.)

“H-hmm?”

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

The brunette grew embarrassed, a different kind of shyness that Wendy usually got from the girl and she barely caught the low mutterings.

“The menu today... -Can’t eat chicken.”

The blonde reared back slightly, her eyebrow raised in incredulity as she repeated the words she managed to catch.

“You can’t eat chicken?”

Still shamefaced, Irene nodded, the pink on her cheeks turning bright red as Wendy continued to stare agape at her. Irene patted at her face and tried to explain herself, Wendy’s eyes widening even further at the clarification.

“I-I had a bad reaction to it once when I was younger and after that, I can’t eat it, no matter how hard I tried to.”

Pity welled up in Wendy’s chest and she glanced down at her tray, taking in the items she had gotten before settling on one, grabbing the boxed cupcake and handing it over to Irene.

“Here. Have this.”

Irene balked (predictably) and tried to refuse it.

“No, no, I can’t - It’s your lunch - Wendy, please-”

Wendy interjected firmly, pushing the cupcake into Irene’s trembling hands.

“Take it. You’re not getting gastritis on my watch.”

Floundering, Wendy saw the fight leave Irene’s body and the girl nodded, opening the box under Wendy’s watchful eye. It was only after Irene’s first bite of the dessert that Wendy turned towards her own lunch.

They ate together quietly, Wendy’s eyes flickering towards Irene every once in awhile, a warm feeling in her chest as she took in the way Irene ate, how the brunette would wipe the pink icing off with her thumb before licking it off, her eating pace matched with Wendy’s. It was sort of mechanic but at the same time, Wendy could somehow see these lunch meetings happening over and over again, a quiet silence that she had never learn to appreciate settling over them as the both of them bit, chewed and swallowed in a similar fashion.

(Underneath the table, unbeknownst to each of them, their feet touched each other’s slightly, connected in a slight way that was unseen by the world.)

*

Wendy asked the questions on her mind when Irene moved to get up, the brunette still red faced, though from arguing with Wendy about payment for the cupcake, the art major looking sufficiently startled at the queries.

“So about the modelling thing, when are we going to do it?”

Irene opened and closed her mouth before turning away again (Wendy wanted to correct this habit), her words uttered to the linoleum floor.

“I... I didn’t think you’d remember?”

A snort exited Wendy’s nose before she could stop it, the blonde reaching out to grab Irene’s chin.

“You think I’d forget you asking me to pose almost nude for a drawing?”

Irene’s skin was warm under her fingers and the brunette made no move to escape Wendy’s hold, only answering in a muffled tone.

“...Maybe?”

Wendy shook her head and drew back, the heat spreading from her fingertips and up her arm, her nerves tingling and sending shivers down her spine.

(Why?)

“No freaking way. So. When?”

Irene’s lower lip jutted out slightly, whether knowingly or unknowingly, making a cute picture that had Wendy floored, her hands digging into her bag for her phone. The lock sound was heard before the girl stared at the screen intently, probably looking through her timetable for a suitable time.

(Wendy had to smile fondly at how scatterbrained this girl was.)

“Would next Wednesday be a good time for you?”

Wendy paused, her mind working quickly before she shook her head regretfully.

“I have a session in the children’s hospital down the road. For experience.”

Irene merely nodded before going back to her phone, her face relaxed in a way Wendy has never seen.

(It would seem that skitty was only comfortable in her own element.)

“Friday?”

Wendy looked to the side, wondering if she had any plans -

Seulgi had wanted to go to that new bar down by the campus, never shutting up about the apparent hot dudes they hired as staff there.

-Which was nothing she was interested in.

(Loud music, alcohol, the grinding and *chilling* with randoms.

Wendy hated it all.)

She grinned, partly out of relief of escaping another bar trip, partly because she liked the way Irene’s face would colour whenever she gave the girl this particular smile and nodded.

(She’s only teasing because Irene was so easy to tease.

Right?)

“Yeah. That’s fine. Where at?”

Irene bit her lower lip and her voice grew softer than it usually was, Wendy leaning forwards to listen.

“P-probably my dorm room? I mean...it’s sort of... yeah...”

Irene trailed off, her eyes wide and shining with what Wendy realised was fear.

The blonde’s heart dropped (what was it about her that had Irene so scared? Wasn’t she *her* muse?) but she maintained the smile on her face, easily plucking the phone out of Irene’s limp hands. She talked as she punched in her number, Irene still looking at her with wide eyes, though the fear seemed to have simmered down slightly at Wendy’s teasing tone.

“Well, just text me the block and room number as well as the time and I’ll meet you there.”

Irene took her phone back blankly, nodding in agreement.

Wendy clapped her hands twice, the previous comfortable silence now stifling and she made to move, halting when Irene spoke up again, the brunette sounding faint yet serious at the same time.

“W-what...what’s your favourite wine?”

Wendy raised a brow, somewhat impressed that Irene remembered something she had honestly said just to mess with her.

(Though being intoxicated while doing this sounded more and more like a good idea, especially with her nerves feeling like they were electrocuted and her chest playing hot and

cold with her.)

“Anything red. I don’t mind.”

Irene nodded once before typing it into her phone.

And then, she smiled, that same smile that Wendy remembered from the park and the blonde felt like her heart had flown up to her throat, watching as the smile lit Irene’s face in a way the sun never could match.

“Okay. I’ll make sure to get them for you.”

There was a slight purr behind Irene’s tone, one that had Wendy weak in the knees and nodding with a dazed smile, excusing herself when Irene stood up as well, the art major lowering her head in a slight bow before saying goodbye.

The blonde walked away quickly, unsure of how to act in the presence of a no longer skittish Irene.

(Her fingers, she noticed later, were still shaking, be it from her frayed nerves or her rapidly beating heart.)

The Kiss

“Don’t forget that your final portfolio is due in a month’s time! I don’t take the *I have no inspiration* bullshit like other TAs so make sure to hand it on time! Got it?”

There was a collective shudder that ran through the class, each of them avoiding their TA’s searing glare fervently. There was a crack and then the beautiful blonde dismissed them, a scoff exiting her mouth when the class practically ran for the door, Irene included. The brunette was barely past the threshold when her mentor called out to her, loud and clear like cold ice.

“Irene, a moment?”

Screwing her eyes shut, Irene froze on the spot, ignoring the pitying gazes from her peers as they filed past her. Taking a deep breath, she nodded to herself and turned around, facing her mentor who was looking at her lazily from her desk, pointed chin rested on a delicate hand. Her feet made heavy footfalls against the marble floor and she forced herself to meet Nana’s gaze, shivering again from the look.

“Y-yes?”

There was a pause before mirth filled brown eyes, the tension that ran through Irene’s ramrod straight spine spilling out like water out of a broken vessel. She scowled at her mentor, a pout forming when Nana teased her gently.

“Honestly. You’d think I was going to hit you or something.”

Irene scoffed lightly.

“You had your scary voice on.”

Shaking her head, Nana reached out and ruffled Irene's hair, the brunette ducking away to avoid any further messing. Grinning, Nana laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them, tilting her head to the right as she questioned the aspiring artist.

"So, how's your final project coming along? Any ideas?"

Irene had to force her blush down, her fingers white against the rings of her sketchbooks as the mere thought of seeing an expanse of smooth white skin and just *Wendy* being her model sprang to the front of her brain.

"I-it's coming along well. I'll be finishing it by the end of the week."

Nana nodded, her facial expression barely changing even though her voice was slightly fraught with worry.

"Is it giving you any trouble? You've been quite out of it in class. I can always look over it and give you a brief overview before-"

Anything else Nana was saying was completely tuned out by Irene, the brunette unable to keep the blush off her face this time around. Although she was sure that no one knew what her final piece would be like, it felt like Nana knew exactly what she was going to do.

Something bold and exciting! Something different! Out of your comfort zone!

She wasn't only distracted in Nana's class, she was distracted in *all* her classes, just enough for Jessica from Design to ask her whether she was under the weather and if she needed someone to accompany her to the doctor's. Irene had blushed before shaking her head roughly, wondering just how to explain to Jessica that she wasn't ill and it was her imagination running wild.

Because a very exposed Wendy, a Wendy whom she had the biggest crush (was it still a crush after so long?), fueled the parts of Irene thought only existed in distant dreams and realities.

Really, Irene never thought she would be this much of a *pervert* until she caught herself thinking about how Wendy's skin would taste like on her lips.

(But there were other things, other mundane things in her imagined scenarios.

Be the cause of Wendy's smile.

Waking up to Wendy's sleeping face.

Many, many mundane things, many things that would bring Irene jolting back to Earth and feeling more stuck in the mud than before.)

“-rene, Irene?”

Irene brought her wandering attention back to Nana, the blonde raised a brow at her, her questions asked and lingering midair. Coughing, Irene rummaged around for a reply and settled on the most innocuous one, plastering on a small smile whilst her fingers started drumming against the black cardboard of her sketchbooks.

“It's fine. I don't want to make it seem like you are biased. I'll submit the full thing in time for the deadline. I won't disappoint you. Promise.”

Nana, seemingly satisfied with the answer, nodded and pulled her hands over her head, her shoulders popping mid stretch.

“Alright. Just remember, the best works will be showed in the hall at the end of the semester and I expect yours to be amongst them.”

Irene gulped, completely forgetting that small detail, but nodded quickly.

She exited the room at Nana's dismissal, another bubble of guilt settling in her stomach.

(Well, *shit* .)

*

By Friday morning, Irene had cleaned her room at least twenty times since the week started, folding and unfolding her clothes back into the cupboard, hiding away books and CDs before taking them back out and placing them on the shelves, even pushing her bed around to make her room seem less like a nerd's and more like a normal person. Somehow, she felt like if her room was neat, her impression of a complete fool would be erased in Wendy's eyes and maybe, just maybe -

She cut her train of thought right there, choosing instead of focus her attention on the books that spoke of many genres, but was primarily on thrillers and children's tales.

God, she couldn't be more eccentric if she tried.

Irene groaned and pushed her face into her hands, thinking that she should just call Wendy and cancel *this* .

(Then Wendy's face, her mouth pulled up in that side smirk she loved so much and eyes filled with concern, dim but bright like the stars, as she questioned about Irene's project and the supposed completion of it.

The amount of care for something that would inconvenience her had Irene forgetting that line of thought.)

But it was set, the message containing her building and room number with time and directions had already been sent out. Wendy had already replied with a simple okay and a

smiley face, an emoticon that had Irene dazed for the remainder of the day, her imaginations now shifting from expanses of skin that looked softer than clouds and white enough for Irene to trace images for days to smiles that healed souls with eyes like stars, dark and mysterious like the skies sparkling planets were home to.

It became less and less about the project and more about the ache settling between her chest and the intense *want* for this not to be because of her grades but because Wendy wanted it *just as much* as she did.

Removing her hands, Irene let out a heavy sigh, eyes falling on the two bottles she had purchased the night before, her identification card used for the first time in such a manner, the rays of the sun passing through glass and reflecting an odd combination of green and red on her tabletop, moving in a manner that reminded her of ocean waves. Her eyes moved towards her clock and she jumped in her spot, frantically reaching for her bags and books before bolting out the door, only realising now that she was late for her morning classes, so deep in her contemplation of what's to come.

The door shut firmly behind her, leaving behind a room that was so clean it would pass military inspection, with two bottles of wine sitting by the window.

She has always been taught that an orderly room, an orderly impression meant that she had an orderly mind.

Even after, very much after the screaming and the terror and the abuse spat from mouths of parents who were supposed to love her always, Irene maintained the facade of an orderly room, an orderly impression.

The orderly room would serve to be a cover, an image she maintains to keep her sanity.

A silent hope that maybe one day, just one day in the near future, she would be her parents' golden child again, that one day her father's words would soothe instead of cutting wounds into her fragile psyche, that her mother's arms would envelope her in warmth rather than push her out into the cold.

(Later, much later, the room would serve to be a cover for her very broken heart, caused by a girl who wanted nothing more than the security of the image of perfection.)

By six pm exactly, Irene had her soul jarred out of her body when knocks resounded on the wooden door, the brunette fumbling with her pencils and charcoals while trying to keep the folded easel in her arms. She failed spectacularly when it slipped out of her arms and landed directly on her toes. Holding back a particularly crude swear word at the back of her throat, Irene forced her tears to still before yelling out, her voice cracking from the sheer pressure at not screaming at her throbbing extremities.

“Hold on, be right there!”

Irene quickly gathered the fallen materials and placed them on the table, limping her way towards the door. She took a deep breath before opening the door, Wendy’s arm in mid raise, presumably to knock again. The blonde looked startled at her sudden appearance before the shock made way for a shy smile to curl on pink lips, her hand going back to her side. Swallowing thickly, Irene stepped aside wordlessly to let Wendy into her room, the image of Wendy curiously glancing around somehow looking very right.

(Like she wanted Wendy to look at every aspect of her life for a long, long time.)

Irene closed the door quietly, not wanting to jolt Wendy hovering near her visual wall, her blonde hair falling forward as she leant closer to several pictures. Wendy even poked at some of the coloured post its Irene had placed beside some of the pictures, smiling at the small messages and annotations of things Irene found particularly inspiring. Irene smiled along, her hands stalling over her messy stationery box and the slightly ajar easel, before she sucked in a breath at the sight of Wendy kneeling down to check out a sketch of a girl with her hair blown by the wind, face covered but smile bright and noticeable.

(Shit, shit, *shit* , she should’ve taken it down, she should’ve shoved it behind her bookcase where it would never see the light of the day again-)

“This is gorgeous. Was it by the park?”

Irene fumbled for an answer before realising what Wendy said.

“It’s just by- the corner with the barbecue pit? I - Wait, how did you know?”

She watched as Wendy’s tracing fingers still slightly before she answered with a light tone, her back still facing Irene.

“The background seems familiar.”

There was something else, something hidden behind the words that Irene can’t decipher but she pushed it aside.

(There was no reason to think that Wendy would be following her.)

Wendy straightened her back before turning around, her lower lip pulled into her mouth while she smiled, Irene struck by the image of a very cute hamster in front of her. The blonde tucked her hair behind her ears, the brunette once again taking in the sharp jawline and the slope of her neck before snapping her attention back to Wendy’s eyes, the other girl speaking quietly but loud in the midst of the silence that had fallen between them.

“So how do you want to do this?”

There was a nervousness in the way Wendy held herself , so far from the usual confident Wendy. The guilt that had made home at the base of her stomach flared, clutching at her throat in a vice grip and choking her, her mind whispering just how bad of an idea this really was.

(Maybe it would be right to just cancel this.)

Wendy had moved to her bed in the midst of her freakout, which had thankfully gone unnoticed, sitting down without an invitation (not that she needed it), brown pools filled with something Irene can't explain. She swallowed the lump in her throat and pushed past the restriction around her voicebox, watching the way Wendy's face went from polite curiosity to confusion.

"We- We could just ...not do this, you know?"

Blonde hair fell over slim shoulders, Wendy tilting her head and pursing her lips.

"What do you mean? Did you want to change models or something?"

There was hurt lacing her words now and Irene could hardly blame her, not after proclaiming Wendy as her muse and wanting to back out right now.

The explanation she tried to give seemed like a cop out, something incomprehensible to both Wendy and her inner voice which was warring with her conscience, very vocal against cancelling this.

"It's just that... you seemed a little nervous? And it's probably making you uncomfortable as well... I just- I don't want to do anything to ruin the friendship between us... I -"

She trailed off, not really sure if there *was* a friendship between them.

Irene had only ever seen Wendy at the corridors and the moments where the blonde came to the library to borrow books. As far as she was concerned, the need, the *want* of a proper relationship, a friendship, was her own unrealistic wishes.

She has only ever confined the image of Wendy to her sketchpads, a smile that could heal with a twinkle in her eyes that even the stars would be envious of drawn in pencil, charcoal, any medium Irene could get her hands on. The silent image behind the good girl, the cigarette between Wendy's fingers, smoke billowing from her pink lips shaped like a bow on top of a present Irene would never receive, was hidden between sketches of Wendy laughing, Wendy smiling with her eyes, Wendy rushing to classes, hair flowing behind her.

She has seen every side of Wendy, even the sides of Wendy the blonde tried to hide from the world, if only by accident, placed in a boundary only a select few could enter.

(The image of Wendy smoking, going against the good girl image placed upon her by the world, by Irene, somehow didn't shatter any illusion Irene had of the blonde.

If anything, it cemented the name behind the beats of her heart, the fire in her veins because Wendy was flawed, Wendy was someone who had *vices* .

She has seen so much, accepted this side of Wendy as well because she has only ever had Wendy in everything she visualised.)

Wendy smiled after a beat, her bag slipping off her shoulder before she made her way towards Irene, fifteen steps between them closing the distance. Her fingers curled around Irene's wrist gently and she lowered her stance slightly to look into Irene's eyes, the brunette's head bowed in the time the blonde had taken to come over.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. I mean, it is an art piece which would be graded and I'm in a compromising position."

Irene opened her mouth to say something, anything, an apology forming on her tongue when Wendy placed a finger on her lips.

"But I didn't come here based on a whim. I would've chickened out if I wanted to but..."

There was a pink hue tinting Wendy's cheeks, the evening sun shimmering through the window they were both standing in front of catching it and highlighting cheekbones that sculptors would rush to carve into marble, so that the beauty could be immortalised. It had Irene breathless, wanting nothing more than to caress it with her fingers, touching and keeping a memory of near perfection with her.

Irene's hands stayed by her side, twitching slightly and it was her turn to blush when Wendy completed her sentence, the blonde's eyes still on Irene's.

"But I wanted to do this for you. I wanted to see how you see me."

There were many things Irene could say in response to that but words could never be enough to explain how Irene sees Wendy because there was how she sees Wendy, with impromptu picnics by cobbled pathways and milkmaid plaits, with old fashioned bicycles while laughing as they rode along to how she *sees* Wendy with her words tasting like sunshine on the tip of Irene's tongue and dark eyes blazing and churning with want that was reciprocated. The taste of water after near dehydration after a long time without a glimpse of Wendy in the corridors, her purple Keds stained with paint that were the colours of azure and marigold and emerald, painting Wendy in that magic that left people on tenterhooks, desperately clawing for more.

But none of these things escaped from her lips (this was the reason why she was an artist and not a writer) but instead she allowed herself to touch, pressing her fingertips to the edge of Wendy's bashful smile, her simple reply making the smile grow.

"Then I'll do my best to capture what I see in you."

Wendy laughed, a small burst of sunshine right in her room and her grip tightened briefly around Irene's wrist, echoing their first conclusion to their first real conversation.

"Make me look good?"

Irene's eyes softened and her fingers stopped just at the touch of Wendy's pink lips, repeating the same thing she had replied to Wendy the first time around.

“It wouldn’t be very hard to, considering my subject.”

Wendy laughed again, her eyes sliding over to the bottles of wine sitting by them innocently. The doe-eyed look was smothered by a cheeky glint that Irene was all too familiar with.

“But first, let’s have a drink to loosen up.”

Irene let out a bark of laughter at that, the warmth emitting from Wendy already intoxicating her in a way no alcoholic beverage could ever mimic.

*

They sat on the floor with cups from Irene’s tiny kitchenette, the white bright against the dark red of the wine Irene had gotten. The bitter taste of alcohol that would usually cause Irene to gag once or twice went down smoothly, the taste of it forgotten in the midst of Wendy’s lip gloss staining the ceramic of the mug and the laughter that she was eliciting from the blonde like she had always dreamt of. They talked about everything and nothing, slowly coming closer together until the notion of personal space was lost in the alcohol induced haze and the comforting touches that came with slight giddiness.

(The fingerprint of Wendy’s mouth against the cup, the weight of Wendy’s hand on her thigh, the close up of a laughter often seen far away, it all seemed very surreal until the burn of the wine in her stomach and the ache in her chest brought her back, reminding her that this was very real and was *happening* .)

The wine must have made her lips looser because she brought up the possibility of her works being showcased at the end of the semester and the alcohol seemed to have made Wendy agreeable because the blonde agreed to it without a second thought. She was even happy about it, squealing about how Irene was going to make it big and how Irene should thank her in speeches she would be making when she was famous, as she poured more wine into both their cups.

There was about half a bottle of wine left when Wendy placed her cup down, her face now slightly flushed, the other empty bottle rolling away easily as she stretched her legs out. She gave Irene an easy smile and tapped the girl on the cheek, Irene chasing the warmth when Wendy pulled away, standing up and dusting her pants.

Mild panic flared inside of Irene's chest before it settled down, Wendy looking around with squinty eyes.

"Where's the bathroom? I reckon we should get started, don't you think? Before we both fall asleep from all the booze."

The thought of what's to come sobered Irene up quicker than she imagined (lies, *lies*, the giddiness, the fragile hold on her control were all coming apart) and the brunette nodded solemnly, her cup placed aside to stand up as well.

"It's that way. You can...change and I'll set up here."

She handed Wendy a robe before Wendy could even ask, the blonde raising a brow before shuffling off, leaving Irene in the middle of her own room. The brunette moved around, wanting to steady her shaky hands before actually drawing the other girl, placing the wine bottles on top of her table, next to the cups, Wendy's lip gloss shimmering under the calming glow of the moon. She flicked on her desk lamp to get some light in the otherwise dark room and proceeded to set up her easel, dragging her bedside table to make a prop for her art materials before rushing over to draw the curtains.

(She was on the second floor but just in case.

Just in case.)

She was whittling her charcoal pencil to a point when Wendy exited the bathroom, clothes under her arm and robe tied tightly around her waist, blonde hair swept to one side. Irene almost dropped the items in her hands at the sight of moving art in front of her, Wendy grinning sheepishly as she made her way to the bed, her collarbone peeking out from behind dark blue material as she raised her shoulders.

“You are not to laugh at me.”

The sight of Wendy and just the knowledge that this was going to *happen* had Irene losing all thinking capabilities, her words escaping before she could get a handle on them.

“Why would I laugh? You’re beautiful.”

(But strangely, she didn’t feel shy after uttering them.

If anything, it was the exact opposite.)

Her words had Wendy blushing, as though Wendy did not know that she *was* beautiful, like living art and it ached inside when Irene thought about it.

How can one be so beautiful and not know about it?

She moved silently, gathering Wendy’s clothes in her hands and setting it aside before guiding the blonde over to the bed, kneeling in front of the sitting girl as she spoke.

“You’re beautiful and I’m going to make sure you will see it and the world will see it.”

Wendy nodded, her eyes bright but no longer filled with the lightheadedness from before and she shifted backwards, her bare legs brushing against Irene’s arms. There was determination on her face and the blonde spoke, her volume matching the sombre atmosphere that had come in the moments before.

“So how do you want me?”

There was a thought that flashed through her mind before she squashed it down firmly, Irene gesturing vaguely around the bed.

“It’s sort of like... a waking up in the morning sort of feel? I was trying to go for the perfection waking up in the morning, despite the mussed hair and sleep creases because you’ve recharged for the day and the weight of the world hasn’t settled in yet.”

She stopped her rambling when she realised Wendy was staring at her, mouth pulled up in a slight grin and eyes glinting.

“What?”

Wendy shook her head, tugging the white blankets from the crease cut corners Irene had put them in.

“It’s nothing... Just that you’re only ever not skittish when you’re talking about art, you know?”

Irene let out a breath through her nose and she shook her head.

“I’m just... I don’t know, it’s easier with paintings and stuff. Life isn’t always perfect but for paintings and photographs, in that moment, in that single heartbeat immortalised forever, everything is perfect. It’s soothing in a way.”

Wendy tilted her head, the smile in her eyes brighter than the one on her lips.

“I get what you mean. What I meant was that you don’t have to be shy around me. I mean, I am stripping for you, aren’t I?”

Irene let out a laugh, liquid courage allowing her to reach out and ruffle Wendy’s hair, grinning cheekily when Wendy let out a squeak of protest.

“Mussed hair and sleep creases remember?”

Wendy narrowed her eyes.

“On second thought, you being skittish was better.”

Irene stuck her tongue out and instructed Wendy on how she wanted Wendy to pose before turning away to give the girl some privacy, heading towards her canvas to make sure she had everything.

When she turned back around, the robe was already by her headboard, Wendy laying on her front with the blanket just covering where the slope of her back ended, feet crossed and lifted into the air. Her front, strategically covered by her arms and the messy hair that Wendy must have shaken to get that (very sexy) look, had Irene almost gaping, the cut of her collarbones and the suggestion of what's beneath them sending a heated jolt down Irene's abdomen.

Anyone would be able to tell that Wendy was naked under the blanket and if Irene could just pick her jaw up from the floor, anyone would be able to believe in waking angels because that was the only thing that would do Wendy justice, the blonde peeking from beneath her bangs to look at her.

“You're going to laugh, aren't you?”

Irene quickly closed her mouth and shook her head, her hands waving frantically in front of her.

“No, no!”

Blushing again, Irene lowered her voice, her tone somewhat akin to awe as she spoke her mind.

“It’s just that... you’re kind of perfect.”

Wendy merely chuckled, her dark eyes twinkling in the dim lighting of the room.

“Well, I guess that’s good for your project, isn’t it?”

Again, there was a hint of something Irene couldn’t decipher behind those words but she shrugged it off when Wendy grinned at her, the blonde angling her head to make it seem like she was waking up.

“How long would I have to stay like this?”

Irene reached over and gently placed the newsprint over the canvas, wanting a backup in case anything went wrong and picked up her charcoal.

“Not for too long, I hope.”

Wendy nodded and became very still.

And then the sounds of soft scratching filled the room.

*

The image that formed on her print was the delicate cross of modesty and downright erotic, Wendy looking very much like the Pre-Raphaelite paintings that had always drawn Irene in. She looked like living desire, the craving, the want, boiling inside of Irene everytime she looked up to gathered another detail to draw, Wendy transitioning from easygoing to sultry in the time Irene had taken to draw her out, the look in her eyes taunting, as though she was saying that she was something out of reach, like the stars she portrayed.

It drew Irene in, consumed her like fire eating away at paper.

It would be a fantastic piece because only the best pieces drew people in.

Just like how her subject was currently drawing her in.

Wendy, to her credit, has not much so much as a muscle besides from her eyes, her eyelids drooping just so to complete the picture of a goddess-like vixen just waking up from a nap.

Irene, to her credit, had kept enough professionalism around her not to shake as she sketched Wendy out, concentrating on the lessons and the techniques to make sure the picture Wendy was currently making would mold well onto the canvas.

However, the further along she got, the more the portrait stopped looking like random shapes and squiggles and actually like *Wendy*, it felt like Irene was touching a part of Wendy no one would ever get to see. It became so real to her that she half expected Wendy to move, to dodge, to arch into the touches she would sweep across the newsprint to add shadows for later references but the reminder that it was a sketch would come back to her when nothing happened, only the breathing sounds coming from Wendy and the scratch of charcoal against paper.

But it was hard, so hard to keep the ache at bay when the slope of Wendy's back looked even more enticing on paper than Irene could ever imagine. Her hands shook slightly, her charcoal dropping on the floor with a clatter.

(She doesn't know if she can continue like this, continue with the want pooling at the bottom of her stomach, feeling as dirty as she did just watching a near naked Wendy splayed out in front of her.)

Wendy moved at the sound, blonde bangs pushed back to look at Irene. Her mouth opened slightly before her lips turned into a pout, Wendy speaking up softly as she regarded Irene with gentle eyes.

“What’s wrong, Skitty?”

Irene swallowed thickly, feeling the burn of tears behind her eyelids, shaking her head in response because she cannot trust her voice right about now. She avoided Wendy’s eyes, picking up her dropped item and continuing, adding just enough contrast to Wendy’s arm to highlight the shape of the bicep bulging slightly in front of her.

“Irene?”

She ignored it, wanting nothing more than to tune it out but the room was quiet and Wendy’s plea was loud even in such a soft tone and it grated more against Irene’s guilty heart.

“Irene, please look at me.”

She looked over obediently, tears leaking from her eyes when she saw the soft gaze and she lowered her head, the *want* taking over her rationality.

(Was it the wine? Her feelings?

Whatever it was, it had complete control.)

“It’s not- It’s nothing- I just-”

Wendy had moved from her position now, the thin sheet wrapped tightly around her chest as she reached out for Irene’s face, thumb rubbing away the tears that were flowing.

“You’re crying. Don’t tell me that it’s nothing.”

The dam broke and Irene confessed softly, closing her eyes to the inevitable slap that would come after she told Wendy of this and the second nature behind this favour.

“I... I like you. I’m *attracted* to you. I can’t see anything but you and then this *thing* came up and I thought it - I just wanted to get to know you but this has gotten way out of hand and I’m so sorry for taking advantage of your kindness like this.”

Wendy didn’t slap her but neither did she move, her breathing quiet against Irene’s growing sobs.

Irene finished miserably, her black stained fingers rubbing at her cheeks roughly.

“I’m so sorry. I understand if you want to leave. Or slap me. I’m fine with anything.”

There was a beat and before she knew what’s happening, Wendy’s hand was curling against her jaw and she was pulled into a kiss, Wendy prying her mouth open in an almost desperate manner. Irene responded before her brain did, her own hands framing Wendy’s face and coming closer, the heat from Wendy’s body all the more intoxicating due to the thin barrier between them.

When Wendy broke the kiss, only then did Irene’s eyes flutter open, her whisper loud despite the heavy breathing.

“W-what-”

Wendy shook her head, the hint of something from before back again before the blonde breathed out her reply in a whisper.

“Shhh, just-”

But she didn't finish her sentence, only pulling Irene onto her lap just enough for Irene to be hovering above her. They stayed in each other's presence for a moment before Wendy was surging up again, pressing her pink lips against Irene's in a cautious kiss that turned into two, three, more, sending Irene's mind reeling. Their mouths never broke apart for more than a minute, just enough to catch a breath before connecting together again. The taste on her tongue reminded Irene of sunshine and wine and the press of fingers into the notches of her back sent her floating instead of grounded.

Soon, Irene didn't know how, her back was on the bed with Wendy hovering over her, eyes sharp and looking very much like a predator she was imitating right now. The brunette all but had a second's warning before Wendy's hot lips met with the side of her jaw, a whimper escaping her lips as teeth scraped against skin, her head tilting back just for *more*. Wendy, seemingly emboldened by her soft moans, licked at a spot before sucking down hard, Irene's arms shooting up and gripping at Wendy's shoulders like her life depended on it.

(It did, it did, she needed to hold on because the temptation to just lose herself in Wendy's essence was too great but she doesn't want to, not so soon.

If this was a dream, she wanted to savour it, hoard each drop between her fingers before it trickled away.)

A breath of Wendy's name, a moan escaped her lips, stifled by the taste of Wendy's skin when the blonde shifted just enough to press her knee against Irene's center. There was a chuckle in response and Irene opened her eyes (when did she close them?) and she was greeted by the Wendy who smoked behind the library and grinned as though there was not a care in the world. A bubble of courage welled within her and Irene reached forward with her lips and pressed fleeting kisses to Wendy's collarbone.

The hand by her abdomen fisted the bed sheets briefly before clasping at her waist, Wendy rasping out audibly for the first time since the kiss started becoming more.

"Irene..."

It was nothing more than her name but it was enough to send Irene tumbling down the rabbit hole, her mouth meeting with Wendy's again in a fiery kiss, Wendy's fingers now tugging at her jumper before pulling it off completely. Fingers traced her abdomen before Wendy's lips

made a path down her chin, her neck before pressing soft kisses to her stomach, her tongue flicking out to lick at the dimple by her ribcage that Irene had always hated but could learn to love, if Wendy's bright eyes were anything to go by.

"Irene."

A hushed whisper against her skin and it was all the warning Irene got before she lost herself against the blonde, fingers pressing into flesh, circling around heat that had been pooling and was finally given relief, Wendy tracing every inch of skin with her lips as though memorising the taste of her.

(And through it all, she wondered if the love she felt was the same as the thumping of Wendy's heart she could feel through their connected bodies.)

The Aftermath

The room was quiet save for the sounds of their hitched breaths and the rustling of sheets.

And for Wendy, those sounds paled in comparison to the ones she was so enveloped in; Irene's soft breathy whimpers, the stick and slide of chapped lips that can't get enough of each other and the hitched murmurs of her name that sounded so much like a psalm, a prayer.

She could see nothing but Irene, smell only the scent of Irene's sweat stained skin, feel the light kisses that silken lips left just by her sternum and know only the taste that was so *Irene* on her tongue.

There was nothing but Irene.

"Wendy-"

Irene pressed closer to her, beautiful dark eyes hidden behind quivering eyelids as she pleaded in a rasp, her hands tight around Wendy's waist, marking invisible imprints that Wendy knew she was going to feel for days. There was desperation in her movements, groaning when Wendy rocked into her *just* so, a grin forming on her lips as blonde hair cascaded around them, curtaining them off from a reality they had both forgotten. A moan ripped from kiss bruised lips when Irene, apparently having enough of Wendy's teasing, flipped them over in a show of hidden strength, Wendy huffing when her back hit the soft mattress hard.

Wendy smiled up at the girl, Irene looking even more beautiful, impossibly so, with her face flushed and her pupils blown. There was a song in her mind now, unknown but melodious as it continued to whisper Irene's name over and over again. She craned her neck upwards to kiss Irene, somehow unable to fathom how she managed to go so long without the taste of Irene on her lips. Irene grinned cheekily and pulled away playfully, laughing that soft laugh when Wendy growled.

The brunette's fingers clasped around the blonde's wrists and she pulled them up, Wendy resisting the urge to fight when Irene ordered in a whisper.

"Stay."

This was coupled with a look behind dark eyes, one that Wendy can't distinguish even as a fleeting thought crossed her mind that it has only ever been Irene that gave her that look. It should scare her, *had scared her before* (just fleeting moments of hello and goodbye surged with tension and looks exchanged), but as Wendy complied with the soft command, there was no fear.

It was almost... blissful.

When she was sure that Wendy would keep still, Irene's hand started stroking at her jaw, soft fleeting touches that weren't circles or figures, nothing like the ones who would press rough fingers into Wendy's flesh in her previous encounters. It was as though Irene was drawing on her, following the curve of her jaw, the slope of her philtrum before pressing a thumb on Wendy's chin, fingers following the natural planes of her face, her neck and then going further.

Like raindrops running down windowpanes and smooth surfaces, Irene took her time just like the rain, each touch light but *burning* just so. But Wendy did her best to stay still, eyes trained on Irene's face as the girl made her strokes, tongue poking out in slight concentration as she continued to play Wendy's body like an instrument she knew best.

Just when she thought Irene had stopped, fingers just at the dip of her hip, Irene pressed a fleeting kiss to her jaw, starting at the place her fingers had just moments ago. She retraced her steps just as slowly with her lips, acknowledging the soft breathy moan Wendy had let out in response to her kisses with a chuckle and a soft murmur. Wendy should say something in response but she was nowhere near thinking at the moment, wanting nothing more but Irene to continue what she was doing, to continue igniting the insides of her with kisses that felt like snowfall.

(But she should be thinking, should be arguing against the *want* , should be answering that little voice in her head going-)

And then Irene's kisses turned scorching, mouth parted to make way for teeth scraping at her abdomen, fingers trailing from her hips to the undersides of her thighs.

If there was any chance of Wendy retaining any thought in her brain, they flew out of the window at that moment, her hands moving and twisting at the bedsheets.

"Irene, *please* ."

Irene chuckled again, a far cry from her usual shy persona and the brunette murmured against flushed skin, her nails scraping at her thighs delicately.

"Just for you."

She didn't think anymore, doesn't want to think anymore, not when Irene's lips met with hers in a fierce kiss, a kiss that took her breath and gave it back to her simultaneously.

Bliss, delight, ecstasy, elation- none of these words could describe the feeling in her chest right now.

There was nothing but Irene.

(But what about later?)

Perfection.

That was what Wendy's parents demanded from her.

The only way the world will ever look up to anybody if there is an image of perfection, Wendy
.

Perfection.

But it was just an image.

As long as she hid the drinking, the meaningless sex, the weed, all things she hated, all things she did just to rebel in some way, from her parents, it would be okay. She'd satisfy her parents with the image of a good girl, the girl who got good grades and didn't go around with boys and *definitely not girls* while she satisfied the dark hunger within herself by immersing in the clubs that Seulgi was partial to and the weed Tiffany would pass to her wordlessly.

Perfection.

Just an image.

(But later, much later, it would be an image she would struggle with as a girl with a broken heart wormed her way into hers.)

Stay?

I will.

Has it always been-

It has always been you.

She woke to those words whirling in her mind, eyes still closed to hold the remnants of a dream that spoke of love and acceptance, heavy on her shoulders but not a burden. Her legs brushed past another pair and she froze, stunned for a moment because she knew that she didn't go to the club yesterday with Seulgi and thus, it would not make sense for her to be in someone else's bed. She cracked open one eye slowly, breathing slowly as to not wake the other occupant up.

Her eyes landed on an easel holding up a canvas.

And at once, the sleep induced haze was chased from her head by the flood of memories of the night before. It felt monumental, as though Wendy had taken a step into a future where her dream, blurry as it may be at the back of her mind, was just a hair's breadth away, real and bright and *terrifying* .

Her chest was heavy and there was nothing more Wendy wanted than to just reach out and grasp the wispy fantasy but at the same time, the thoughts that had been silenced yesterday by her *want* , her *need* to be enveloped by everything Irene had awoke again, taunting and whispering in voices that sounded suspiciously like her parents' disappointment.

(The image she had struggled to keep up was slowly shattering.)

She closed her eyes to stop the sudden rush of tears from falling, to stop her eyes from going towards the figure that was laying next to her because then it would give name to the feeling in her chest that was weighing her down and making her feel like a feather in the wind -

There was nothing but pure and untouched feelings in her heart for the girl next to her.

But it was something she cannot, *should not* be feeling for her.

(There was nothing but pure and untouched love in her heart for Irene.

And it scares her.)

*

It was when light was slowly filtering in through the gaps of the closed curtains that Wendy forced herself to move out of the cocoon that they had built for themselves over the course of the night, the crisp morning air raising goosebumps on her skin. She slid out from under the blankets silently, a move well practised from all those nights before and she stepped away from the bed, shivering slightly in her lack of dress, her eyes making an unwilling path back towards the bed.

And she regretted it.

Because on the bed, with her eyes closed and mouth slightly apart as she breathed softly, was the most beautiful version of Irene she had ever seen.

Irene, sweet, beautiful, cheeky, sleeping Irene.

And at that very moment, Wendy swore she could hear her heart breaking.

(*Oh no .*)

It's then she started to panic, her plan to sneak out of the room ruined when she hurriedly gathered up the bundle of clothes Irene had placed at the corner of the table to get dressed and in her haste, knocking the canvas off the easel. The clatter was loud, despite the carpeted floor and Irene had shot up from the bed, hands clutching at the blankets instinctively as she glanced around wildly. Frozen in place, with her hands clutching the front of her unbuttoned shirt, Wendy watched with wide eyes as Irene laid her sleepy gaze on her, the ache in her chest intensifying when the other girl's lips widened into a smile immediately.

“Wendy.”

Just a soft murmur of her name took her breath away and it was all Wendy could do to not cry right there and then.

How could Irene have so much power over her?

(It was that smile.

It was that smile from that day in the park.)

There was a small bloom of anger spiking in the midst of all the love and hopelessness she felt, a misplaced ire because Irene shouldn't have so much power over her, shouldn't have misled her and asked for this favour if she was *attracted* to Wendy. And now because of that *deceit*, Wendy was the one who had to juggle these *feelings* that she shouldn't even be having.

(But why?)

Wendy shouldn't be having these *imperfections*.

(Just the thought of her parents' disappointment burned a hole through her stomach, hot and angry like lava seeping through the cracks.)

She ignored the call and buttoned up her shirt quickly, scanning the room for her bag and spotting it by the end of the bed. She could feel Irene's confused stare at the back of her head and it bothered her because now she wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed with Irene, cocoon them away from the world and just get lost in the warmth they both shared.

But even as she got her shoes on and ready to leave, she found that she couldn't.

Not with Irene's eyes on her like that, expectant and open, hair mussed and an open smile that made the sun pale in comparison.

So she plastered on a smile and turned around, aware that it was more of a grimace than a friendly gesture at this point and spoke, lowering her head slightly and pointing towards the fallen painting.

"Sorry about that. I hope I didn't mess it up."

Irene shook her head slowly, shifting so that her feet were touching the ground.

"No, it's fine. I only got the sketch on the newsprint done and after that we..."

She trailed off with a blush but the smile on her face didn't disappear.

If anything, it grew wider, as though it was something sweet and happy, rather than a stain Wendy hoped her parents would never find out.

That particular thought fueled the (thoughtless) words out of her mouth.

"About that. Let's just forget about it, alright?"

The ache in her chest doubled when the smile slid off of the brunette's face.

"I-I'm sorry?"

And because the engine had already been started, Wendy found it hard to keep control of her mouth, more (careless) words spilling out like a waterfall.

“Forget about last night. Clearly we were both drunk and obviously there was a lot of tension because I was naked and you did say you were attracted to me. So we can just forget about it and treat it as a one night stand. Okay?”

“A one night stand?”

Irene had gotten to her feet now, neck flushed and her eyes bright, looking very much like she did not understand a word Wendy was saying.

Wendy nodded.

“Yeah. Things teenagers do? Casual sex? Just a romp in the sheets and then we forget it happened-”

She cut herself off abruptly at the sight of Irene’s tears pooling at the corner of her eyes, the brunette’s fists tight around the sheet she was using to cover herself.

“ *Casual* - You think this was casual for me?”

Wendy schooled her expression into a blank one, a grand feat considering her shaking limbs and her trembling heart.

“Wasn’t it?”

Irene whispered softly, voice cracking with unshed tears.

“There was nothing casual about me sleeping with you.”

Wendy hummed, her tongue feeling like lead even as the sentence formed.

“Well. You did say you were taking advantage of the situation.”

Irene flinched as though as she had been hit, head reared back and eyes wide. There was no stopping those tears now, Wendy watching in some sort of dark elation at the sight of it before a massive amount of guilt for being so heartless swept over it. She pushed over it with difficulty, forcing her lips to curl up into a smile as Irene tried to defend herself.

“I wanted to- I wanted to get to know you, the muse behind most of my drawings. I wanted - I just wanted to actually see you this time -”

The harsh words fell from her lips easier this time, fueled by the notion of being absolved of this *mistake* because it can't be her fault if Irene was the one who seduced her in the first place.

(But each word felt more like a knife stabbing into her own heart, the salt that made Irene's tears rubbing into the wounds and making it sting in agony.)

“I guess you did see me this time. All of me in fact.”

There was no sound that escaped from Irene's lips, even as the tears continued to flow at a steady pace, her expression one of disbelief as she continued to listen to Wendy.

The blonde pushed through, listening to the dark feelings inside her instead of the screaming voice of pain and kicked the fallen canvas slightly, making a noise as she regarded the sketch in front of her.

“I will just write this off as what it is, a mistake? Plus I think all female college students get their token lesbian fling, don’t they?”

She bent down to pick up the sketch and put it back down, if only to physically avoid looking into Irene’s pain filled eyes.

(This was wrong.

Those eyes shouldn’t be like that.

They were supposed to be smiling, twinkling, filled with secrets from the stars that Wendy had to pick apart.)

“But I guess you did do me justice in this drawing. And you can’t really see my face. So I will not rescind my subject permission. Don’t worry. You won’t fail your class.”

There was an intake of breath before Irene spoke, stuttering as her statement got caught in her throat.

“I don’t care - How can you -”

Wendy stood up and brushed away the nonexistent lint on her pants, not giving Irene a chance to complete her sentence.

(Her heart was already crying out.

One more anguish filled sentence from Irene would destroy her completely.)

“Of course you wouldn’t. You slept with me, didn’t you?”

She could hear Irene giving up and Wendy steeled herself to deliver the last of her “argument”, her parents’ voices no longer disappointed, the unspeakable delight inside of her keeping the guilt at bay.

“Look, I’m not being unnecessarily cruel. I’m not like you. I’m not... *gay* . You can see how this is a mistake on my part. But I’m okay with it. Just -”

She paused, glancing upwards slightly and found herself caught in a swirling pool of brown and heartbreak.

Wendy continued talking, each words contributing more and more to the shattering of the heart behind the stars.

“Let’s never speak of this. And let’s never talk to each other again, alright? I think that’s best for everyone.”

She turned around and made her way towards the door, her fingers clasping on the doorknob tightly, her arm shaking like a leaf.

She slowly twisted it, hearing the lock disengage with a click and the hinges creak as the wooden panel swung open, the sounds almost covering the inaudible Irene had spoken.

“I thought of one thing last night. Before we fell asleep.”

Wendy closed her eyes, frightened of the sudden burning in her throat and behind her eyes.

“I thought to myself, I *told* myself that I’d climb the highest mountains, fight with any god, even destroy an empire just so I could get the stars your smile seems to run on.”

Wendy opened the door roughly, wanting nothing more than to escape Irene's desolated confession.

"Because I've seen all your smiles and yesterday, that was the first time I've seen you smile with your heart on your sleeve."

The blonde stepped past the threshold but even distance didn't manage to keep Irene's words from her ears.

(Maybe they had always wanted to hear them.)

"And I wanted nothing more than that for you. For you to keep smiling."

The door had clicked shut behind her but not before Wendy caught the end of her sentence.

"But it seems like I was wrong."

Wendy slid to the ground, hand clamped around her mouth tightly so that the sobs wouldn't escape from her mouth. Behind her, behind a thin wooden door that separated her from the girl who looked like a movie when her heart broke, she heard a thud and a muffled sob before another thud sounded. Inside, past the delirious happiness and the sounds of her parents' approval, the empty hole in her chest panged loudly, her heart commanding her to go back in, to gather up the other half of her soul and just keep it by her side.

But Wendy's legs were incapable of moving, not with Irene's final confession running through her mind, coupled with the cruel words she had spat at the brunette.

And then there was no stopping the tears, Wendy doesn't know how to stop them, the howl of hurt inside overpowering the things she thought were important (are important?).

This was *pain* .

(Like how Irene made her feel about everything else, it was pure.)

This was pure, unadulterated pain.

This was pain of no measure, nothing like the ache she had woken up to just moments ago.

And she knew.

Wendy knew, though she had made many mistakes, this was one mistake she can never take back.

(Being with Irene was never the mistake.)

This was the mistake she could never undo.

*

She had gone home after she picked herself from the floor, tear tracks wiped away using the sleeves of her shirt and her hair pulled back into a bun to give some semblance of neatness and none of what had transgressed last night. Her entrance into her house was greeted with the appearance of both parents, a surprising sight for her considering both her parents were too busy maintaining their standard of living. Swallowing that shock, Wendy palmed her neck nervously before making her way towards them, her father eating his breakfast slowly whilst reading the newspaper, her mother eyeing her critically.

She sat down with them quietly and accepted the food the long time help gave her, raised to be polite even though the last thing she wanted to do was to eat right now.

(Wendy wanted the sanctuary of her own room, wanted privacy so she can break into pieces without letting anyone know.)

She picked up her fork slowly when it seemed like her parents wouldn't be saying anything, nearly choking when her mother piped up, quiet and unassuming.

(But Wendy knew better.)

“We called Seulgi last night. She said you weren't with them. Where did you go?”

The blonde swallowed her food before answering, wiping the oil stains on her lips gingerly and lowered her head meekly.

She gave a version of the truth.

(Her mother could smell a lie from a mile away.)

“I was with a ...friend. They needed help with their schoolwork.”

Her father made a grunting sound, clearly pleased with her actions.

Her mother, graceful and silent, merely eyed her before going back to her food, Wendy's lie passing over her head easily.

“Good. Remember, Wendy-”

She recited the end of the sentence in tandem with her mother, the words instilled into her head since birth.

“We need to maintain an image of perfection.”

Wendy nodded and looked back down at the food on the plate, nausea building at the back of her throat at the thought of her parents finding out just how imperfect their child was.

(An image of perfection.

Who was she kidding?

Wendy hadn't been perfect since day one.)

*

(Wendy hadn't talked to Irene in days.

Three days, if anyone was counting.

She was.)

Out of some deprived curiosity and a card crushed in her hands, she had gone to the library three days after *it* happened, wanting nothing more than to see the girl who had slipped this item she was holding into her locker. Wendy was greeted by the stern, older librarian, the front desk inconspicuously lacking with a fresh faced, god sculpted smile that greeted her every time she went in. Freezing in place, the blonde's eyes widened at the sight of the old lady before gaining the courage to go to the front counter, ignoring the many eyes that suddenly turned towards her and the whispers that seeped from behind cupped mouths.

(She knew how she must look, bedraggled, tired, haggard, so far from the image she often portrayed.)

“Hi?”

The librarian gave her a curt nod before staring at her expectantly.

(Irene should be there.

Wendy knew her shifts, knew it like the back of her hand.

But she wasn't there.)

The old lady was unhelpful, unlike Irene who always took the time to listen to her requests before helping hand and a shy smile, and shooed her away to the tables once she realised that Wendy wasn't going to borrow anything, the blonde standing there like a statue and gaping. Wendy stumbled towards the tables, her peers still staring, still whispering at her state.

(Perfect.

Perfect.

People will respect perfection.

But that's not what she was now.)

For the first time in a long time, the library's atmosphere suffocated her.

And that same suffocation followed her out of the library, her brain on a replay, her cruel words looping in a circle as the images of Irene looking up at her lovingly, Irene looking at

her with shattered pieces of her heart within deep, dark oceans, Irene-

Irene, Irene, *Irene* .

Before she knew it, her legs had taken her to the area behind the library, her sanctuary, her relief from a life where everybody knew her as the *good girl* (she wasn't, she wasn't, she was *far* from it) and where nobody judged her for liking the girl who smiled like she had been sculpted by the hands of the gods. She slid to the ground and tried to pull in a breath, tears fogging her vision as she struggled to keep the sobs down, as she struggled to be Wendy, perfect daughter of the Sons, rather than just *Wendy* .

(A lie, though beautiful, could only go so far. And it often fell far from the truth.

She was such a *fake* .)

“It's better to just cry it out.”

Firm hands grasped at her shoulders and pulled her into a hug, Tiffany's perfume wafting up her nostrils, warmth wrapping around her.

And Wendy cried.

*

“What is perfection anyways?”

Tiffany blew a stream of smoke away from Wendy's face, the blonde sniffing quietly as she continued clutching at the card in her hands.

After ten minutes of crying, Wendy had somehow blabbered out the entire backstory behind her tears.

And surprisingly, or rather not so surprisingly, Tiffany had taken her story without a hint of judgement.

And a lot of compassion.

Wendy rubbed at her cheeks and murmured softly.

“My parents told me that it was good grades, better social life and a squeaky clean image.”

Tiffany scoffed, the spliff hanging from her lips precariously.

“So basically a politician.”

Wendy shrugged, merely staring at the crumpled piece of paper forlornly.

(How did her life get so messed up?)

“It didn’t get messed up. All of our lives are messed up from the start. It’s how we chose to walk in it that determines a good life from a shit one.”

Blinking rapidly, Wendy’s head snapped towards Tiffany, the black haired girl still inhaling the smoke nonchalantly as though she hadn’t spoken.

“H-how-”

“You spoke out loud.”

“Oh.”

Tiffany dropped the lit spliff onto the ground and watched it burn, the glow at the end drawing Wendy in as well. She shifted, the crinkle of paper catching Tiffany’s attention. Wendy clutched it closer to her chest when Tiffany reached out for it, hunched over it almost protectively as she glared at the older girl, Tiffany’s hand pulling back.

“What is it?”

Wendy’s grip tightened around it, her lips barely moving as she answered.

“I found it. In my locker. It’s mine.”

Tiffany gripped her shoulder gently, pulling Wendy’s body away from the shielded paper.

“Okay. It’s yours. I just want to see. I promise I won’t take it away.”

It took a couple more minutes of coaxing before Wendy even relaxed her grip away from the paper. Though stupid, she felt as though if she let it out of her hands, she would never be able to have it back, touch the last thing Irene had touched, see the last thing Irene had ever given her. Tiffany took the crushed piece of card gingerly and smoothed it out, revealing a rough sketch of a girl on the bed, eyes half closed and a smile curling at one end of her lips.

Tiffany whistled.

“Wow.”

Wendy kept silent, watching as Tiffany flipped the card over, the invitation to an exhibition held by the Arts Department at the end of next week.

Wendy had turned the card over so many times that she could recite every word on it verbatim.

She could also tell the drawing was new, something Irene had added in just before she slipped the card into her on campus locker.

“She’s really good.”

Beneath the drawing of the girl, half asleep, half smiling but a hundred percent peaceful was an epiphany, one that spoke more of a goodbye than a love note.

This is how I see you. I hope one day, hopefully in the near future, you’d be able to see yourself like this. Because you’re perfect the way you are .

(It was terrifying how Irene knew her innermost thoughts when they plagued her like wasps on a target.

But if she overlooked that fear, there was nothing but a sense of liberation.

She found comfort in the way Irene had saw through her and still thought she was beautiful.

Still thought she was perfect.)

Wendy whispered softly.

“She is the best. She’s so good.”

And she closed her eyes, feeling another surge of tears.

“She’s too good for me. A me who can’t be anything but imperfect.”

Tiffany’s arm encircled her shoulders again and she was pulled into a side hug, the senior slipping the card back into Wendy’s lifeless fingers.

The blonde gripped on it at once, hanging onto it as though it was a lifeline.

“You say that. But from what I see on the card, I think you’re the only one who thinks that.”

Wendy opened her eyes slowly, Tiffany waiting patiently for her to listen completely before continuing.

“Because from that drawing, from those words, it seems to me that Irene thinks you’re perfect the way you are.”

Tiffany paused for a moment, allowing the words to sink into Wendy’s brain.

“And people forget, though perfection grants respect and power, it’s really our imperfections that gives us the love that carry us on our journeys.”

Her hand closed over Wendy’s and she pressed against the card, a true smile, one that Wendy has only ever seen directed towards Jessica, was given to her.

“Stars aren’t stars because they are beautiful and perfect. Stars are stars because they chose to shine the brightest despite the flaws. Remember that, Wendy.”

The Broken Heart

The Broken Heart

There was a broken canvas by the door, white linen torn from the wooden frame and with it, the destruction of the painting that was on it. Her art supplies were scattered on the ground, pencils snapped into half while her paintbrushes and empty wells of oil paint rolled by her off center study table. Her bed was stripped of its bedsheets, the cloth long stuffed into a black rubbish bag and placed in a corner of the room, banished due to its ability in helping Irene recall the memories.

Her hair had gone unwashed for days, the slick on her skin reminding her of the sweat that had dried over the hours and her torn, blood red stained lips that tugged and ached whenever she moved them told her of just how chewed up they were. If Irene was to look in the mirror, she'd see her stained face, the eye bags that were so dark, it gave her a haunted look, a look that told her nothing of despair, of soul shattering, cry-in-your-pillow heartbreak.

This was the opposite of orderly.

But in a corner of the room, by the banished sheets that smelt like Wendy and the broken canvas that spoke of nothing but heartbreak, was a row of finished paintings, an art series of shattered dreams that made sense to Irene's broken heart. They were light and colourful, filled with the images of rose pink lips and the hope that one day she might wander around exhibitions with a hand in hers that fit perfectly, a hope that continued to plague her even as her silent room continued to mock her with echoing words that cut and bruised.

That was orderly.

Irene wiped at her cheeks uselessly and pushed her unkempt hair back, her paint stained fingers shaking from exhaustion. She closed her eyes and tried to just breathe, tried to ease the leaden weight in her chest that had been with her since Wendy walked out of the room and called them a mistake.

(She was not a mistake.

There was nothing wrong-

She was not a mistake.)

She had tried to forget about it, tried to push it out of her thoughts (out of sight, out of mind) by drowning herself in her work. She worked herself to the point of fainting during class and burned the midnight oil completing her set of artworks for her final assignment but it was harder than the movies, the books would suggest. Wendy would crawl into her drawings with her crooked smile and a quirk of an eyebrow, found doodled on the side of her notebooks with sleepy eyes and messy hair. Her body parts, from the creases her eyes would make when she smiled to the dimples by her spine at the bottom of her back would decorate her sketch paper, disjointed, separated, but still Wendy to Irene.

Wendy was still Irene's muse.

(But this cannot go on.)

Irene clenched her fists and took a look around her room, letting the mess settle into her consciousness. She then took stock of what she needed to replace, mentally taking in the damage done and counting out how much of her measly pay from the library would be able to cover and she'd still be able to have enough to eat by the end of it. She compiled a list of chores to do for later, clothes to be washed, trash to be thrown, personal hygiene, grocery shopping, and nodded to herself, carefully maneuvering through the messy room to get to her mattress.

And then, because having lists were fine and attempting to forget was hard, because it was hard to forget someone who gave her so much to remember, Irene laid down onto the mattress, her face turned into the area where Wendy had slept. She inhaled deeply, her grief filled mind taking in the scent of the fabric cleaner and turning it into the scent of innocence, her body curling onto the spot where it had long cooled but felt like it was Wendy's warmth burning her.

And not for the first time over the course of two days, Irene cried again.

(Forget about it.

Move on.

Two words.

Six letters.

Easy to say.

Hard to explain.

Impossible to do.)

You are a mistake.

These were the words her father had said to her coldly when he kicked her out of the house, her mother's face averted as the young girl struggled to get her bags into the trunk of her aunt's car.

We weren't anything. You were my mistake.

Her girlfriend of three months had left her with these words, delivered expressionlessly while avoiding eye contact. Irene had stood there, eyes burning from the tears that refused to fall, the thump of her heart resonating together with the jeers and judgement from their peers.

You can see how this is a mistake on my part .

These were the words Wendy had thrown at her after their night together, after a night of sharing sweet, love filled words and the promises of a good morning that came with a goodnight. These were the words that framed the scoff of disbelief when she told Wendy that she wasn't using the assignment as a stepping stone to sleep with her.

These were the words that sealed the lock around her heart, building walls as high as a mountain and as transparent as bubbles because while she wanted to show the world her heart, she didn't want anybody to hurt her anymore.

Because Irene will never be anyone else's mistake again.

“There are designated crates for each of your assignments! Find the ones with your name on them and place your projects in. No excuses!”

Nana snapped at them sternly, a finger pointed towards the boxes lined up nicely at the back of the tutorial room. There was a flurry of activity around Irene as her peers moved towards the area, lugging canvases wrapped up in bubble wrap clumsily. Remaining in her seat quietly, Irene thumbed her set of paintings absentmindedly, her other hand playing with the wet ends of her hair, the drying lock soft and silky, finding no rush to hand in her assignment in the midst of the flustered crowd.

“Once you're done, you may leave! I'll be posting the names of the paintings which would be exhibited by the end of the week so keep an eye out.”

Murmurs of assent were heard before the students shuffled out of class. Irene waited until the last student stepped past the threshold before getting up slowly, her chair scraping against cement floor loudly. The screech caught the attention of her mentor, Nana raising a brow at her as Irene lugged the heavy load towards her own crate, stopping when Nana called out to her.

“Irene, hold up.”

She turned around dutifully, fingers still gripping the edges of her bound up canvases tightly.

“Yes?”

“Bring yours up here. I’ll evaluate now.”

There was a part of her that wanted to drop her paintings into the box just a couple of steps behind her. Nana’s tone, however, made clear that it was an order, not a suggestion. Sighing, Irene flipped her still wet hair over her shoulder and carried her pieces over to Nana, the blonde gesturing towards the table. With a grunt, she heaved the squares onto the table before helping Nana remove the bubble wrapping.

One by one, her “masterpieces” were revealed, Nana’s expression slipping into one that Irene often dubbed as her “art critic” face, the tutor’s eyes flicking up, down and sideways, examining each of the four paintings that Irene was supposed to submit. She supposed this was the time where she should be nervous about the assessment, a bubbling pit of dread in her stomach and shivers running down her spine. But Irene felt nothing, merely staring blankly at Nana whilst the blonde nodded and murmured inaudibly to herself.

There was a flurry of *something* twisting in her stomach when Nana reached the last painting, her mentor’s eyebrows flying up to her hairline at the sight. There was a quirk of a smile, a dash of pride behind dark eyes and Nana looked up, Irene unclenching her hands when the blonde started speaking.

“Well. It looks like you really went out of your comfort zone, Irene. These are beautiful, especially this one.”

Nana had, predictably, given praise to the one painting that had taken literal tears from Irene to complete.

It was the picture of Wendy on the bed, in the position that she had started off with, with her mussed up hair and half lidded eyes, seductive and alluring while being the picture of innocence at the same time. It was the memory of Wendy's lips, quirking into a smile with a story that Irene longed to read, with twinkling stars behind dark eyes that drew people in. It was the image of Wendy bathed in the glow of a barely rising sun, the soft colours of yellow and orange, hair almost bright in comparison and face turned away slightly to stop the light from reaching her eyes.

It was the painting of the physical embodiment of living desire.

It was the Wendy Irene saw, soft and pliant under her fingers, with a smile that spoke of the heart behind high walls and lips that promised a good morning from a goodnight.

(There was another painting, done in a fit of anger with dark colours, angry colours, splashes of red and blue that was almost black, where Wendy looked like she was drowning in self-doubt and unspeakable guilt, almost as though she was pulling herself from the brink of negativity.

It was on her floor, torn and tattered, swept to a corner where she would never have to see it again.

Because that was not how she wanted Wendy to see herself.)

“This set has to be the best work you've presented to me yet. Do you have a name for it?”

Irene didn't.

But the words rolled off her tongue almost immediately, her eyes glancing down at the paintings spreaded out on the desk.

“Mornings with you.”

Nana nodded approvingly, her fingers lingering over the painting of a simple breakfast and intertwined fingers, brushing past the misted mirror where two shadows could be seen brushing their teeth, to the third picture where a joint silhouettes of two girls walking through a park. They finally hovered over the picture of the girl waking up on the bed (Wendy), Nana’s smile growing soft as she regarded Irene.

“These are really good. You probably already guessed but I will be presenting this during the exhibition. You have your subject permission, right?”

Irene nodded blankly, pulling out the crumpled piece of paper that Wendy had signed when she was happy and squishy.

(Which soon turned into tears and heartbreak-

No.

Don’t think about that.)

Nana took the sheet from her gingerly, her eyes suddenly sharp as she observed Irene. The art major tucked her hair behind her ear, her gaze lowering when Nana started speaking again, venturing into a topic Irene hoped that Nana wouldn’t have picked up from her paintings.

(But wasn’t that a futile hope? Nana was after all her mentor.

And didn’t all the great paintings have a tragedy behind them?)

“Though, I have to ask, as your friend and mentor, have you been alright lately?”

Irene forced herself not to cry, inhaling sharply to stop the tears from forming.

She had promised herself, after wrapping the last painting in her room this morning, she wouldn't cry anymore.

She will not cry anymore.

(Because she wasn't a mistake.

She was *never* a mistake.

But it was so hard not to, not while Wendy's words kept replaying in her head, the complete opposite of the poetry the blonde had whispered on her skin, with her heart out in the open.)

Nana, blonde but not vapid, could probably see her struggle but thankfully said nothing of it, choosing to instead comment on something else.

“Because you've been looking very tired lately. And I think today is the first time in days I've seen you with your hair washed. You're usually very neat.”

Irene cleared her throat slightly, her answer coming out in a soft rasp.

“I'm okay. I was just stressed out over the assignment.”

Nana looked disappointed at her answer but did not pursue further, Irene sighing in relief at the easy acceptance. The blonde looked back down at the paintings and started to pack them again carefully, gesturing for Irene to help. Relieved at the reprieve, Irene hurriedly assisted, wanting nothing more than to run out of the class as soon as she was done.

Just as they were wrapping the Wendy picture, Nana spoke up again casually, her blonde hair hiding her face from Irene's view.

(There was a lilt in her tone that told Irene that the matter wasn't over.)

"Irene, if this is how you paint when you're stressed, I don't think I'd ever ask you to challenge yourself again."

Stricken, Irene stammered, asking for an explanation in a shaky breath.

"I-I'm sorry? I thought you liked them?"

Nana tapped the last part of the bubble wrap down and lifted her chin, her eyes regarding Irene carefully.

"I did. And they were amazing."

"Then what's the problem?"

Nana lifted the canvases easily and carried them over to Irene's crate, her words thrown over her shoulder.

"The world might love beauty that is broken but as your mentor, Irene, I can tell you-"

Nana whipped around and pointed a finger at her.

“I can tell you that I do not like it when my mentee paints beautifully while broken. Because it meant that someone hurt you.”

Irene’s eyes widened.

“No- no one hurt me, I told you, I was just stressed-”

Nana stopped her with a wave of her hand.

“Great paintings might have been born of tragedy and hurt, Irene. But truly captivating paintings, beautiful paintings that had people feuding over them, those were painted with the feelings of love and hope.”

Irene lowered her head, unable to reach Nana’s bright eyes.

“I -”

Nana made a noise.

“I don’t know what happened. And I’m sure you don’t want to tell me. But for your sake, for your wellbeing as well as your potential as a painter, I hope it is resolved soon. Either by you or them.”

“I don’t understand-”

Nana’s eyes softened and she spoke quietly.

“I just said it earlier. Truly captivating paintings are painted with feelings of love and hope. And even though your paintings were filled with hopelessness, there was also a lot of love and desperation behind them. If you do not resolve whatever it is that was - *is* - hurting you, then you’ll paint tragedies instead of the love stories you so obviously want to tell.”

If Nana was waiting for a reply from her, she would never get one in this lifetime for Irene had bolted out of the classroom the moment she felt the tears burn the back of her eyelids.

Wendy’s words came back in a rush of sound, together with her parents’ hatred and the taunts of her first love, pounding and pounding away at her already cracked heart while she struggled to breathe and run at the same time.

She had barely made it to her safe place when the first tear fell, her promise broken just like how the rest of her neat, orderly life was.

(She *can’t*, she couldn’t think about it, not with the taste of Wendy on her lips, not when she knew how Wendy sounded like asleep and happy, soft purring from deep within her chest and a smile that showed her heart.

How can she resolve anything when she was terrified of what it might take away from her?)

*

“I thought I’d find you here.”

Irene looked away from her sketchbook to find blonde hair straying into her vision.

For a moment, she thought Wendy had come to find her.

Then her vision cleared and Jessica sat down lazily by her under the tree, the blonde leaning against the trunk as she tilted her head in Irene's direction. Pushing down the feeling of disappointment, Irene strained to give Jessica a smile, politely closing her sketchbook and putting it aside. Jessica smiled back, the older girl looking more relaxed as compared to the last time they had met.

(The last time they had met outside of a classroom setting, it was merely a brush of shoulders at the front doors of the library, Jessica looking frazzled, downtrodden and *confused* .

Irene had wordlessly taken over Jessica's shifts at the library, wanting to give the older girl some measure of comfort in at least one aspect of her life so that she could resolve whatever it was that was making her so worn.

Irene never asked for an explanation and it wasn't until later, when the gossip was travelling through the grapevine filtered back to her that she understood Jessica's worry.)

"Hey..."

The blonde continued to stare at Irene, eyes flitting side to side as the smile slipped off, lips pursing and brow furrowing. The silence grew around them but it was not uncomfortable (nothing would be uncomfortable after *that* day) and Irene soon slipped off into her own world, the sketchbook that she had put aside opened on her lap once again. She clicked the top of the mechanical pencil twice to lengthen the lead before drawing, the pencil scratching against paper and soon random sketches decorated the page, Irene's hand moving mindlessly.

It was when she was created the shadows by bowed lips that Jessica spoke up, the blonde leant into her curiously, the design student tapping against the page.

"These are nice."

Irene stopped, about to thank Jessica for the compliment when she realised just what she was drawing.

On the page, in fragments of a person, an eye, the curve of a slightly curled hand, the slope of a jaw, familiar bowed lips, was Wendy.

Resisting the urge to tear the page out, Irene calmly shut the sketchbook, her pencil slipping from her trembling fingers. Jessica caught the stationery in a graceful swoop, delicately placing the blue item onto Irene's lap, her eyes narrowed in concern. Irene shook her head minutely, Nana's words playing in the back of her mind while Wendy's scathing comments burned behind her eyes, her hands shaking from the sheer betrayal that was her body that still wanted nothing more than Wendy.

"Irene, are you alright?"

Irene sniffed loudly and murmured a yes, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes to stop the tears from flowing yet again.

(She promised herself she wouldn't cry again.)

She knew that her actions betrayed her claim and yet she can't keep her fingers from shaking and her eyes from tearing up nor can she keep the words wanting to tumble out and break down in Jessica's arms, knowing that if there was anyone who could understand, it would be Jessica herself.

After all, Jessica did go through something like this previously.

(If anyone who could understand *Wendy*, wouldn't it be Jessica who had led two girls on because she was confused?)

A hand patted the top of her head and Irene lifted her face from her hands to see Jessica slowly comforting her, the older girl ruffling her hair gently. There was a gentle smile on her face, concern and sympathetic but not pitiful and Jessica's fingers slid in her hair, untangling the knots Irene had left behind after the scorching shower she had.

“You don’t have to pretend. At least not around me.”

With that one statement, the tears fell from Irene’s eyes unbidden, the brunette turning into the blonde’s embrace, comforting despite the bony feeling that came from too thin limbs. She clutched at Jessica’s shirt and she blubbered on uselessly, her thoughts and aches from the past three days tumbling out like a waterfall, in a rush and filled with pain. Jessica did not say a word during her word vomit, her hand continuously patting the top of her head while she made quiet hums not unlike the purrs that Irene had heard from Wendy while the younger blonde was sleeping and *happy* .

It was when her sobs had died down to a soft whimper and the voices in her head quieting down in response to Jessica’s ever present stance that Jessica spoke up, the blonde sounding weary, as though she had taken Irene’s burden onto her shoulders.

(But beneath the tiredness, there was also a line of happiness, bright and small and something not even the anguish Irene was feeling could touch.)

“You know, sometimes loving is like breathing. Easy. Simple. Most times, even needed. There are times when loving someone meant that your world was a little brighter, that the smile on their lips will bring one on yours as well.”

Irene breathed in shakily, wondering just where Jessica was going with this.

“But because loving is like breathing, easy and simple, it is also suffocating. There are times where someone you *hate* just breathes and you look at them and can’t find any fault in them except for the fact that they are *breathing* .”

Irene nodded when Jessica paused, presumably because the blonde wanted to see if she was listening.

“I know how that is. I’ve been where Wendy is right now, where the outside world is suffocating her and feeling like loving someone, breathing in that someone, was more like a noose than a salvation.”

Irene tightened her hold and questioned hoarsely.

“Then how-”

Jessica seemed to know what she was about to ask as she answered before the question was even formed.

“You give her time. You give her a choice to come to you and you wait. She’s thrown the ball into your court and now it’s your turn to return it.”

Jessica’s nails scratched against her scalp, soothing Irene’s frayed nerves.

“Wendy is terrified of the world knowing that she loves you. And no matter what, the choice for her to love you openly is hers alone.”

Irene nodded, understanding finally what Nana and Jessica were trying to say.

“You wait. And you continue hoping.”

Jessica let out a soft breath, her arms looping around Irene’s shoulder when Irene pulled away, eyes red and swollen.

“And if she decides not that loving me is too much?”

Jessica’s smile turned sad, brown eyes dark and pitying now.

“Then you let go of her love that is like air and learn how to press your fingers into the palm of your hands so you can remember how she felt like. Then you move on.”

(But will she find the courage to find some way to breathe again when Wendy was her air?)

*

Irene held a card Nana had given to her wordlessly in front of Wendy's locker, with a picture of the image she wanted to keep of Wendy in her mind on the back of it and her hope latched onto it.

(With her love.

Her desperation for Wendy to see herself for what she truly is.

Imperfectly perfect in Irene's eyes.)

Steeling her backbone and feeling a little courage from the small action, Irene slipped the card between the grates, the soft thump telling her that the action cannot be taken back.

The ball was in Wendy's court now.

While it does not make her feel any less broken, Irene did not feel as useless as she did three days ago.

She doesn't know if Wendy would receive it. Or that if she did, would she even look at the card? Would she read the words on the front, inviting her to Irene's first exhibition? Would she turn the piece of paper around look at the drawing, read the words Irene had painstakingly thought out for her because there were things that should be left unsaid and things that should be said a thousand times and this was one of those things? Would she

understand what Irene had taken a night to understand, read past the passage and into her drawing, read out the love and desperation that Nana had so easily seen?

And if Wendy did see all that, would she care?

Or would she scoff and throw the card away?

These were questions that plagued her, her pessimistic side digging more holes into her battered heart while her desperately hoping (loving) side kept the torn organ beating, making her run back and forth between grief and high delight.

But she had taken a step forward, the uncharacteristic bravery that had allowed her to have her muse in her painting coming back once more to crawl past the crippling anguish to manageable sorrow.

This was all she could do now.

(Even if there was no happy ending for her, Irene could only hope that Wendy could look at herself in a more positive light.

Because while the image of breakfasts and morning routines were amazing, the one thing that made Irene smile more than anything in the world was Wendy smiling as though she meant it, carefree and light and with a lot of acceptance.)

The ball was in Wendy's court now.

The End

Chapter Summary

Mostly it was the curve of Irene's lips when she smiled, the sparkle in her eyes when she spoke of things that interest her, the attentive way she listened to Wendy despite the fact that Wendy teased her half the time.

Most of the things buried there had to do with Irene.

Chapter Notes

The End. Thank you being with me all this while.

It was a 10 centimeter by 10 centimeter square piece of silky paper, the kind that you'd see on expensive invitations, cream coloured and smooth. On the card, in fancy cursive type, were words Wendy had long memorised, fingers tracing each letter carefully as her mouth murmured after the touches silently, reverently. She had long memorised the information on the invitation, always at the forefront of her mind despite her efforts in keeping it in the back, where she had buried many things.

(Mostly it was the curve of Irene's lips when she smiled, the sparkle in her eyes when she spoke of things that interest her, the attentive way she listened to Wendy despite the fact that Wendy teased her half the time.

Most of the things buried there had to do with Irene.)

But these days, along with the loss of control over her tear ducts, these things were dislodged, brought to into the open where she had to deal with it, along with the sketch behind the smooth, cream coloured card, where Wendy was half asleep but happy, grinning at the Irene that was absent, relaxed in a way Wendy herself had never seen.

It was just a card.

But the significance of it was tremendous.

She twisted in her bed and held the crumpled card, the abused piece of paper worn and torn from the many ways Wendy had perused it. The lines, the tears, no matter how carefully Wendy tried to flatten it out and fix it, they never went away, never quite the way it was when she found it.

(Perhaps it was a foreshadowing of how their relationship was.)

She traced the drawing again, her chest aching and wanting, trying to absorb the last vestiges of Irene's touch (had been doing so for the past week), to understand the emotions behind the simplistic yet heavy words.

How long had Irene taken to write those words?

Did she take a long time to draw Wendy?

Was the memory of Wendy hard to summon after all those (cruel) words?

Did thinking of Wendy hurt her?

(Like how the thought of Irene hurt Wendy?)

Hurt.

It seemed like such a shallow word to describe how Irene looked at her when she spat those terrible things at the brunette. It seemed like a cop out, a way to put things in a box and hide it away because there was no way to describe the shattered look in Irene's eyes, the silent tears that pooled at the corners or the despair that crossed that beautiful face.

It was a word that did not encompass the way hope drained away from happiness filled eyes and the downturn of lips that promised a good morning from a goodnight.

It has to be a word used in tragedies and never in love songs.

Perhaps for good reason.

This is how I see you .

Wendy closed her eyes, blonde strands falling in front of her eyelids and blocking the light from filtering through, wanting to stop staring at the drawing of herself that she had never seen before.

But the sketch had already been burned into her memory, soft, pliant, *happy* and it itched underneath Wendy's skin to know that the girl Irene saw was vastly different from the girl Wendy was.

Irene saw her as perfect.

But Wendy knew, from the time she started drowning in her parents' expectations and the burden of being perfect in the world's eyes, she was not.

If she was braver, more accepting of that pure, untouched love for Irene in her heart, maybe she would be able to admit that there were different kinds of perfect, even if they disappointed her parents.

But she wasn't.

Wendy was scared of the eyes her parents gave her, *would give her* if she displayed an image that was less than the perfect daughter that she wanted.

And she can't live with herself if she chose Irene and Irene found out just how much of a fraud she was.

An imperfection .

So she hid.

She hid and avoided and played dumb to all these, hanging on to the one thing that had kept her going all these years.

Right up till the evening of the exhibition, Wendy was still undecided on what she was going to do.

On one hand, with the information she had memorised in her mind and underneath the tips of her fingers, wanted desperately to go and see Irene, apologise for the awful things she said and maybe, just maybe, be brave enough to admit her feelings.

On the other hand, she felt like hiding in her room until the love in her heart turned to ashes, until the cracks in her armour could be filled with makeup and a smile that fooled everyone. She felt like shying away until she was *Wendy* again, the Wendy that never disappointed her parents, the perfect music therapy student who had the rest of the student body at the palm of her hands.

She was damned either ways because both options might cause her to lose Irene, even when the girl wasn't even hers to lose to begin with. Fleeting smiles and casual glances with deep

seated aches in the middle of her chest didn't count, not when there were dreams of a fairytale ending and a smile that could outshine the sun's rays in a heartbeat.

Not when she had a glimpse of her life with Irene in it.

(There were also nightmares of tears and snarls, where her words would be thrown back in her face, nightmares of a reality where she drowned in self-doubt and unspeakable guilt and the eyes that held Wendy captive turning cold.)

It was that dream she had the morning where she had felt the most open that spurred her into action, the promise of more mornings of never hiding and the release of a burden that she had taken onto herself when her parents demanded the image of perfection swaying the scales from being *Wendy* to being the Wendy Irene saw her as.

Perhaps it was part desperation, an attempt to dig her way out of this hellish limbo she had gotten herself in.

(Even if it ended badly, even if Irene looked at her with eyes colder than ice and words that would shatter the shard of pure, untouched love within her heart, it would *end* .

It would end and she would have to accept that her role in Irene's life and Irene's role in hers was over.)

She sighed to herself, running her hand through her thoroughly messy hair.

“ *Fuck* .”

Moving towards her closet, Wendy started pulling out clothes, though fashion was the last thing on her mind. But now that her mind was made up to go, to have a conclusion to whatever stalemate they had going on between them, she wanted Irene to notice her.

More than anything, she wanted Irene to look at her and *listen* .

That even if Wendy can't be anything less than the image of perfect, she never meant any of the things she had said.

That she never wanted Irene to shatter like that.

(So even if Irene listened and turned away from her, she would do anything to make sure Irene would never hurt again like that.

And when that thought slid into place within the deep vestiges of her mind, it settled the churning in her chest somewhat.)

It was a plan.

Or the very shaky start of one.

*

Wendy grabbed the disposable wet tissue from its packet and wiped away the ruined eyeliner that she had been attempting to get right for the past two minutes, her shaky fingers dropping the pencil onto the dressing table. The item landed with a clatter, Wendy exhaling an even shakier breath as she tossed the used tissue into the bin, taking in a breath before reaching out to pick up the eyeliner, her third attempt for the night. The brush flowed easily, following the shape of her eyelid and ended with a flick, Wendy keeping her eye shut for a period of time, slowly counting out the seconds in hopes that this would be third time lucky.

“Going on a date tonight?”

Wendy's eyes flew open at the sudden intrusion of privacy, the barely dried eyeliner sticking to the top of her eyelids as she whipped around to scream at the intruder. Shocked at the

expression on her face, Seulgi raised her hands up in surrender, the black haired girl making her way slowly into Wendy's room, eyes roaming Wendy's face. The blonde huffed and turned back around, snatching yet another wet tissue to clean her eye.

"Have you ever heard of knocking?"

Seulgi made a noise and a thump was heard, Wendy looking at Seulgi sprawled out on her bed through the mirror.

"You've never minded before. What's the big fuss now?"

Wendy's words caught in her throat and a whine escaped her lips instead, the blonde choosing to focus on her makeup rather than Seulgi's sudden intuition. But unlike the third try, her hands shook too much for the brush to make a neat line on her eyelid, the slight tremors causing the line to have bumps in them. Huffing loudly, Wendy threw the pencil down and grabbed another tissue, brushing at her eye roughly.

"You're going to take your eye out, Wendy."

Seulgi took the wet tissue from her and gently wiped away the traces of eyeliner, Wendy lowered her eyes and murmuring softly.

"Thanks."

Seulgi hummed and picked up the eyeliner, her steady hands completing the mask Wendy was attempting to paint on earlier. In the mirror, the previously pale, tired pallor of her face was hidden beneath the base makeup, the puffiness of her eyes made sharp by Seulgi's impeccable skills. Her lips, chapped and bruised from the constant chewing, were curled in a slight seductive smirk, the red of her lip gloss hiding the white of her skin.

She looked like she usually does, calm, put together and ready to challenge the world.

Even though she was crumbling inside.

“So do you want to share what exactly has gotten you in such a slump?”

Inner conflict screeched to a halt and Wendy had to stop for a moment to remember to plaster on a smile before looking up into Seulgi’s eyes, trying desperately to pull together the persona she had always shown to the equally bright girl. Displaying her teeth in a grin that felt more like a grimace, Wendy shrugged, not quite managing to meet Seulgi’s gaze.

“What do you mean?”

Seulgi’s thin fingers caught her chin and pulled her face up, brown eyes serious, deep in a way that has always been hidden behind curved slits.

“You know what I mean. I might be stupid but I’m not blind. You’ve been out of sorts the past week and I’ve never seen you so down. What’s going on?”

Wendy opened her mouth to argue but the determined look on Seulgi’s face had her lips sealing together tightly, the blonde shaking her head while pulling her face away from Seulgi’s hold.

(Seulgi always had been smarter than people gave her credit for.)

Huffing, Seulgi sat on the floor and rested her elbows on Wendy’s knees, her eyes peering up at Wendy.

“Wen. Whatever it is you think you can’t tell me, you can. I’m your best friend.”

And there it was, that fear that had plagued her and battled her ever since she woke up blissful in Irene's bed and ended up guilty and angry exiting the brunette's room. It gripped at her heart, reminding her of the inevitable disappointment of her parents at her *imperfection* and the resulting disgust that would come from her friends. Her chest ached and burned, the back of her eyelids feeling like knives as the imprint of the sketch swirled in her vision together with tears that felt like acid in her eyes.

“ *Wendy* .”

Seulgi sounded panicked now, thumbs brushing just by her concealed eyebags, her best friend rising to her knees to comfort the blonde.

“Wendy, please don't cry. It's okay if you can't tell me. Just don't cry, okay?”

But it only made the tears fall faster, the fact that Seulgi was being patient and *kind* with her because it just reminded her of the distance that Irene had put between them and the words that had caused them in the first place.

It reminded her of an epitaph that was more like a goodbye than a love note.

(A stark reminder that Irene, beautiful, earnest, heartbroken Irene, had not once blamed Wendy for words that shattered hope and love.)

This is how I see you. I hope one day, hopefully in the near future, you'd be able to see yourself like this. Because you're perfect the way you are .

She heaved in a deep breath, sobs peppering her words and gripped at Seulgi's wrists.

“I-I messed up, Seul, I messed up so badly and I - I don't - I can't fix it- I can't be anything less - I have to be perfect, Seul but I messed up-”

She clung to Seulgi like a lifeline, a person from her perfect (imperfect) life that only saw the Wendy she wanted them to see, craving for the contact like a lost child. Seulgi, to her credit, shifted her hands to hold Wendy delicately, one of her hands reaching around to pat Wendy's back.

"It's okay, it's okay. Just cry it out."

Seulgi continued to hold her and whisper soft words of comfort, Wendy's sobs gradually quieting down. With soft touches, Seulgi used a tissue to wipe away the ruined makeup, her mouth tilted up in a sad smile that matched the look in her eyes.

"It's going to be alright."

Wendy shook her head, watching as Seulgi pulled away a stained tissue.

(Perfectly white.

And stained messily.)

"No, it's not. I messed up really bad, Seul. I hurt he- someone really badly and I don't know how to fix it."

Seulgi patted her on the cheek, her words kind, her eyes melancholy.

"Then you try anyways. You'll never know until you try."

Wendy gave Seulgi a look, partly desperate, mostly insecure.

"I don't know if I can."

Seulgi sighed and rubbed at Wendy's cheek, her head tilting to one side.

"Yes, you can. What's stopping you?"

(Many things.

So many things.

But mostly just the look of disappointment on her parents' face and Irene's indifference.)

She whispered softly, not exactly the truth but the next best thing.

"What...what if that makes me not perfect?"

To her surprise, Seulgi snorted loudly, the sympathetic look on her face giving way to one of derision.

"Perfection?"

Wendy lowered her gaze, the dark feeling in her heart rising yet again, whispers of words that sounded so much like her parents at the edges of her mind.

"Yeah. I can't- It's not-"

She didn't know how to say it, didn't know what to say that wouldn't reveal the deepest, darkest part of her life to Seulgi.

“What’s perfection if you can’t have love, Wen?”

Her head snapped up, eyes roaming Seulgi’s face for a sign that she had heard wrongly.

The slight smile on Seulgi’s lips, the glittering in the other girl’s eyes told her she didn’t.

Seulgi spoke again, explaining her vague words earlier.

“I’ve seen you staring at her. For a while now. That brunette from the courtyard with her sketchbook and purple bag.”

Wendy rushed to explain herself, the fear overflowing into full blown panic at the thought of Seulgi even knowing about her *imperfection* .

(No, no, no, if Seulgi -

If Seulgi knew, just how many others-)

Seulgi shushed her with a tap on her cheek, the black haired girl pursing her lips slightly.

“And you don’t know. You don’t know how you stare at her.”

Wendy croaked shakily, her fingers limp in Seulgi’s hold.

“How do I-”

Seulgi laughed, happy and light, her eyes filled with something that Wendy had never thought would be in them if Seulgi ever found out.

“You look at her as though the music you hear from the universe had manifested into a lifeform.”

(Seulgi looked at her with pride in her eyes, genuine happiness that Wendy has found love.

Even if it was an unconventional love.)

Seulgi pinched her cheek lightly, shaking her face as she continued talking.

“You stare at her like you want to melt her down into music notes, notes you can put on your sheets so that you can keep them.”

The blonde could hardly respond, thrown off by a reaction that she would’ve never factored in.

“Y-you’re okay... You’re okay that I’m in love with a girl?”

The words, the one sentence she could barely think about, let alone say out loud was out in the open, lingering in the air between Seulgi and her and she couldn’t take it back.

Seulgi laughed softly, patting Wendy’s cheek once again.

“Yeah! What’s the difference, girl, boy, it’s love! And at the end of the day-”

Seulgi’s hand left her face and poked her hard in the middle of her sternum, right where her heart was currently beating a mile a minute.

“What’s in there that matters. Who cares about perfection or image or whatever it is that people try to force upon our generation these days? I, for one, don’t think much of perfection if it means that you can’t love.”

Finally, *finally*, Seulgi’s words sunk in, together with the advice Tiffany had given her, allowing for the blonde to crack a smile that didn’t make Wendy feel like she was shattering her soul.

“Seulgi, you’re really smart, you know that?”

Seulgi puffed her chest proudly.

“Of course I am!”

They both laughed, Wendy feeling the burden slide off a little when Seulgi regarded her with nothing but happiness behind dark eyes.

“But really. Try. You’ll never know.”

Wendy nodded, taking a deep breath and steeling the courage that Seulgi had unknowingly given her with her unconditional support.

“Okay.”

Seulgi smiled, her trademark toothy grin and picked up the base makeup jar, gesturing for Wendy to stay still.

“Good. If you try, then there’s nothing stopping you from getting the happiness you deserve.”

Keeping still, Wendy closed her eyes, burning the acceptance that Seulgi had given her with the image of herself that Irene saw at the back of her eyelids.

“Thank you.”

(If Seulgi, her best friend who had only ever viewed her as perfect could accept this part of her, this *imperfect* part of her -

Maybe, just maybe, what she thought was imperfect what just what it was.

Neither perfect or imperfect.

It was just her.

And maybe, just maybe, her parents would see that too.)

*

The light feeling that had accompanied her from her bedroom to her car, with Seulgi's over-enthusiastic fist pumping and words of encouragement echoing in her ears, did well to keep the insecurities at bay.

Right till she pulled up to the auditorium where the exhibition was held.

The sheer amount of people had her freezing up, the mere thought of going after Irene in the midst of all these people had the fear flaring up yet again.

How can she do anything in front of a crowd of people who would judge her despite not knowing her?

And she never thought about the painting.

How would Irene have painted her?

A messed up caricature hung up on the wall for the world to see just how twisted Wendy had been?

It wouldn't have been Irene's style but she had *hurt* Irene, given her pains of in proportion of a tragedy and this would probably be the only thing that Irene could've done to get back at her.

This is how I see you.

Would it have changed in the week they have distanced themselves from each other?

But the entrance was just there, the light filtering through soft and orange, with the flicks of shadows to show just how popular the art exhibition was.

(Irene was just beyond those doors.)

Just try!

She gritted her teeth, pushing down the insecurities and unlocking the door quickly and heaved out a breath.

No.

She was going in.

She was going to *try* .

The blonde exited the car with unsure steps, but emboldened with the encouragement from friends and the hope that Irene will listen to the love she has to say in her heart.

*

If the crowd outside seemed like too much, it was nothing compared to what Wendy walked into. She had never seen so many people converged in one place at the same time, just for the sake of looking at art. And she wasn't even sure they even knew what they were looking at, judging by the bored looks on some of the younger patrons' faces and the utter confusion present on who she presumed to be the parents of the art students whose works were being displayed.

She tore her attention away from the people (who didn't matter), eyes flitting from place to place in order to find the one she came for, going on her toes ever so often to peek past the humans that were all taller than her.

But to no avail.

She hissed, low and sharp, and edged over to the wall where there was a modicum of space to breathe. Sighing, she ran her fingers through her hair and tried looking again, wondering just how the numbers of Arts students seemed to double in the time she had taken to retreat towards the wall. Fingernails digging into the palms of her hands, Wendy once again rose on her toes, neck craned to look for that one shade of brown that she could pick out from a crowd.

“You look like a very stunted giraffe when you do that.”

Barely catching herself when she rocked back onto her heels, Wendy whipped around to find Tiffany staring at her, dark eyes glinting under the bright fluorescent lights. She scowled at the older girl and huffed pettily.

“It’s not my fault I was born short.”

Tiffany chuckled, making her way towards Wendy gracefully, leaning on the wall just beside Wendy.

(Just like how they were behind the library, away from the crowd and the looks.)

“Why are you here anyways, Tiff?”

Tiffany’s eyebrow arched high and the black haired girl pointed towards a section where there were nothing but black and white photos framed by shadows from lights positioned deliberately around them.

“That’s my project.”

(Right.

She was a photography major.)

Wendy nodded silently, her eyes moving away from the alluring art piece and back towards the crowd, once again searching for the girl whose name made up the lyrics to the tune in her heart.

“Irene’s over there, if you’re looking for her.”

And of course, Tiffany's hand would be pointed towards the largest group of people, all of them clamouring around what seems to be a set of four paintings, the lights angled towards them to display the beauty to its maximum effect. Wendy's heart jumped to her throat at the thought of people just staring at a painting of *her*, a painting Irene had drawn of her, *for her* and again, the nervousness bubbled in her stomach, mixing in with the fear and shock.

Tiffany's fingers clasped around her arm and the dark haired photographer pulled her towards the crowd gently, words soft but audible even in the din of the patrons.

"Come on. Don't duck out on her now."

She stumbled slightly, her words coming out just as twisted, feeling very exposed and downtrodden at the same time.

"Wait- Tiffany, what if she doesn't-"

Now that Irene was within her grasp, her brain had stopped working, the courage from Seulgi's words bleeding through and dissipating.

What if-

"It's enough that you're here. It means you're trying. She will understand that."

With that as her parting gift, Tiffany all but shoved her towards the crowd, Wendy almost tripping over her own feet before she found her balance. She glanced back at Tiffany, inwardly frustrated with her fluctuating bout of bravery and resolve, only to have the dark haired girl give her a deadpan look and a flick of her hand, as though commanding Wendy to move through.

For once, her small stature gave her an advantage because she managed to squeeze from the back of the group towards the front. The blonde was greeted with Irene's artwork, beautiful

and enrapturing, with bold colours and an almost photographic quality around them, framed by a golden body that seemed pale in comparison.

Her eyes flitted towards the title above the paintings, lips forming the subtle title, heart understanding at once what it meant.

Mornings with you .

Swallowing thickly, Wendy allowed herself to look at the first painting, taking in the simple morning task of having breakfast together before moving on to a heart-wrenching piece of two girls just walking and spending time *together* . The third, mere shadows of people brushing their teeth in a foggy mirror, spoke volumes about the hope that Wendy had crushed that morning in the dorm room, was mesmerising and unreal at the same time.

Beneath her volatile emotions, there was pride, soft and glowing and running through her veins because these were paintings Irene had painstakingly spent hours upon, touching and retouching until they were what they were.

Perfect.

(And beneath it, if Wendy took a closer look, there were the strokes of brush that had hesitation in them, as though Irene was rethinking the colour she was using before going for it anyways.

Imperfections shaping up to make a perfect artwork.)

Her eyes travelled over to the last painting, the painting she had posed for-

Her breath caught in her throat.

The noise around her died down, as though she was swallowed into a vacuum, as the sight of her own portrait greeted her.

It was the image of the mornings she dreamt of, light and soft while the morning sun filtered through the curtains, the soft colours of yellow and orange painting her skin like a love letter rather than nature's beauty. There was music in every detail Irene had taken time to add in, from the blonde of her hair that looked like it was weaved from gold so silky, it was the envy of gods, the slope of her back that was the canvas to Irene's wandering fingers, to the slope of her nose, her face just hidden behind mussed up hair and the shadows of sleep.

And that curl of a smile that was purely reserved for Irene, blissful, gentle, with her heart on her sleeve.

(No one would be able to tell it was her but Wendy could see it, the dream unfolding in front of her again, with Irene sleeping quietly by her side, fingers intertwined and hearts synced as one.)

This was the Wendy Irene saw, rough edges softened by the lack of a burden, imperfectly perfect in every way.

(It was the Wendy Wendy wanted to be, aching, desperately so.)

And with every line that Irene had drawn on the canvas, love was there for all to see.

*

"It's you."

A tall blonde broke her concentration and Wendy turned away from the painting with difficulty, meeting with dark eyes that stared her down.

Instinctively, she knew that this was Irene's mentor.

The blonde tilted her head towards the painting, her blank expression making it difficult for Wendy to get a read on her.

"You were the model for that painting."

Thoroughly intimidated by the woman, Wendy nodded meekly, her lips barely parting to answer.

"Yes. That's me."

The older woman's eyes narrowed briefly but didn't say anything, choosing to instead make her way around Wendy and towards the roped off area, long legs clearing the height easily. Wendy swallowed the lump in her throat down and walked towards the front, her heart thudding in her ears and her palms sweaty.

And then everything seemed to slow down.

Once again, she was plunged into a vacuum when Irene came into her sight, pale and tired but no less beautiful, brown hair that Wendy had run her fingers through twisted up into an elegant bun that showcased the cut of a jaw that Wendy could spend days writing lyrics about. She coughed slightly when her eyes lingered on cherry pink lips, chapped and bruised (just like hers), shaking her head to make herself focus before her gaze fell on brown eyes that spoke so much.

And just like that, the final piece clicked in her mind, loud and resolute.

(She is in love with this girl.)

Eyes that held the calamity of an ocean widened at the sight of her, Irene barely flinching before she recovered, the surprise at seeing Wendy evident on her face. Summoning a small smile on her lips, Wendy waved awkwardly, her teeth clenching down when Irene left her mentor's side and made her way towards her, her movements slow but deliberate.

As though she was giving Wendy time to run away.

“Hi.”

Wendy forced her feet to stay, for her fingers to clench by her side instead of around the other girl's waist, returning the greeting politely.

“Hey.”

An awkward silence fell between them, palpable in a way that never was, not even when Irene was skittish and Wendy was desperately trying to be oblivious. Clearing her throat, Wendy searched around for something else to say before choosing the most obvious thing to discuss about.

She pointed towards the painting of her.

“So that's-”

Irene nodded quickly.

“Yeah. I hope it's okay.”

Wendy breathed in sharply and took a step closer, her fingers twitching against her sides.

“It’s- It’s better than okay- It’s kind of perfect.”

Bashful, Irene lowered her head and murmured quietly.

“Thanks. It’s because of you anyways.”

The scoff of disagreement exited her mouth before she had a chance to think about it, choosing to instead lay out the one revelation she had over the course of the week.

“I’m not perfect. Far from it actually.”

And she found herself drowning in Irene’s eyes, the artist lifting her head just enough to regard sadly.

“No. But then again, no one is perfect.”

They lapsed into silence again, loud and stifling (somehow the conversation had taken a turn that Wendy did not expect). Wendy struggled to put into words on how she understood where Irene was coming from, about a version of perfect that didn’t destroy Wendy’s soul when Irene moved away slightly, her gaze lowered and her stance guarded.

“Thank you for being my muse. And for coming. It meant a lot to me.

It sounded final.

It sounded like the words on the invitation that Wendy kept close to her heart, more like a goodbye and less like a love letter.

Cemented in the way Irene sighed and turned away, the people around them now looking on curiously.

The image of Irene walking away from her hurt more than the looks of disappointment she kept seeing in her mind, her parents' disapproval slowing down to a soft hum as the cracks of a dream long wanted started to sound.

It was this image that spurred Wendy into a decision.

She found that she could be selfish for once, that happiness was something she had to grab to attain and this allowed for the surge of courage behind her words, soft but audible, shaky but strong.

“You are the best parts of the songs that I love.”

Irene's feet stopped midair and the brunette turned around slowly, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“What?”

Very aware of the crowd watching them like they were a movie, Wendy walked towards Irene slowly, the both of them separated by just a velvet rope, repeating herself slowly, steadily.

“You're the best part of the songs that I love.

Irene was clearly confused, her brow furrowing together.

“Wendy?”

(Couldn't she tell?

This was Wendy not caring.

This was Wendy facing her fears.

This was Wendy being *Wendy* and not caring about her parents' expectations.

This was Wendy rectifying her mistake.)

Wendy cleared her throat, her eyes wide and imploring as she tried her best to put her feelings into words.

“You're the air that I miss between the spaces of my fingers, the reason why I clench my fists so that I can touch even just the remnants of your hold.”

The crowd was silent now, watching carefully at the display before them, more interesting than any of the artworks presented before them.

On her back she could feel Tiffany's steady gaze, supportive and strong.

Just try!

“Wendy, what are you saying-”

Wendy interrupted her, wanting nothing more than to listen to every word Irene was going to say but knowing that Irene needed to hear what she has to say first.

“I’ve made a mistake. A big mistake. But it’s not the one I told you I made the morning after. It’s the one that gave you the shattered look in your eyes, the one that caused you so much pain.”

There was a flash of pain behind shattered eyes and Irene looked away, causing Wendy to clear the barrier between them so that she can grasp Irene’s hands in hers. Warmth flooded her palms and she tugged on them lightly so that she can deliver apology straight to Irene’s heart.

“And I never want that to happen again.”

The hands in her hold were slack, Irene stubbornly turning her face away.

“Wendy, I-”

Wendy gripped her hands tightly, wanting nothing more than to tear her heart out and let Irene listen to the lyrics that were made entirely of her name and the beats that went accordingly.

“Please, *please* , if the girl who said that she’d get the stars for me is still in there, let me in. Please let me in. Let me prove it to you.”

Irene spoke up, her voice hoarse and tight, as though she was holding back tears.

“What can you prove to me that I haven’t already seen?”

(Hurt, disbelief, the lack of conviction laced her every word.

But Wendy also heard the hope, the love hidden behind the pain.)

“Let me prove it to you.”

Wendy pulled on Irene’s wrists, waiting for the brunette to look at her before continuing, strong and convicted, completely dedicated to her proposal for Irene.

“I’ll crawl through the depths of the earth and challenge the thirteen levels of hell for you. I’ll do everything I can so that you will never have to feel that kind of hurt ever again.”

Irene’s breath hitched, shattered pieces of her heart coming back together slightly behind eyes as deep as the ocean.

“I’ll do all that I can so that I will never take the heart you’ve given me for granted.”

Wendy closed her eyes, brought Irene’s hands to her lips and whispered the last of the words in her heart straight onto Irene’s skin, hoping to tattoo it there.

“I’ll do all that I can so that you will always know that I’m in love with you.”

(This was Wendy at her most vulnerable, her *perfect* veneer cracked and open for the world to see, the world who had only seen the image she wanted to portray.

She wasn’t like Irene, painting words of love onto images of beauty.

But wearing her heart on her sleeve, baring her soul for the world to see-

This was what she could do.

She could let the world see *Wendy* if that meant that she could have Irene’s love.)

She kept her eyes closed, ears particularly in tune with the silent gasps of the crowd and for a moment, she thought that Irene was going to hit her.

And then something collided with her forehead, Wendy opening her eyes to find a smile that seemed like it was framed by the sun itself, small and demure but outdoing the beauty of nature and everything around them. Irene whispered softly, a known secret between the both of them and it had Wendy smiling, the cracks in her heart slowly healing.

“I’m in love with you too.”

The crowd erupted into cheers, happy for them even though none of them understood a single thing that went on. Wendy laughed softly, cradling against Irene’s forehead gently as they rocked together, smiling and in their own world.

(There was still hurt behind those words, a wariness that Wendy could sense behind smiling brown eyes.

But Wendy had time.

And Wendy will ease them away from Irene slowly, surely and always by Irene’s side.)

“And the story has a fairytale ending.”

Tiffany glanced to the side where Jessica was making her way towards them, the soft smile on the blonde’s face betraying her emotionless words. Shaking her head, the dark haired girl pulled Jessica into a hug, their cheeks slotted together as they continued to watch over Irene and Wendy, Irene’s blonde mentor hovering over them protectively as the patrons started to

become rowdy. Chuckling, Tiffany pulled away slightly to look at Jessica, noticing the slight frown on her face.

“What is it, Jessi?”

Jessica shrugged, worry lining her face.

“It’s just that... what about Wendy’s parents?”

Tiffany hummed.

“It’s up to them now, isn’t it?”

Jessica scoffed at her deadpan answer but offered the silver lining that Tiffany had always known.

“Well, at least they are going to face it together?”

Humming again, Tiffany merely hugged Jessica tightly, watching as her junior smile as though she had gotten hold of the world in her arms.

(Later, much later, Wendy would confide in Tiffany about the way her parents dealt with it, burying their heads in the sand and ignoring it.

Much like how they ignored their daughter’s nightly habits.

It would trouble Wendy greatly that her parents really did only care about the *image* of perfection but Tiffany would tell her that they will come around sooner or later.

But it would probably be sooner than Irene's steadfastly stubborn parents.

But as Jessica said all those months ago, at the very least, this was something they could go through together.

And that, Tiffany thought was the most important thing.)

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